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Body Horror Revisited:

A new wave of body horror films directed by women

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Abstract

This thesis examines a selection of recent horror films directed by women that seek to explore and challenge the conventions of the genre. Making reference to the existing critical writing on the genre, and in particular its representation of gender and the body, each filmmaker's employment of established narrative and aesthetic conventions is examined and assessed. Key critical questions explored include: how the genre has been impacted by the influence of new audiences; how filmmakers seek to "progress" the genre's representation of the female body; how specific subgenres, such as body horror and rape-revenge, are reinvigorated and nuanced by the filmmakers' own concerns and those of their audiences; and how effectively the resultant films challenge traditional binaries of gender. It will be argued that though the films analysed vary in terms of production contexts, all can be linked by their shared commitment to challenging, and rejuvenating, the genre.

Introduction

Cinema as an art form flourishes due to its ability to create a vivid response to the scenes, the imagery and the sounds depicted within its limited and safe boundaries. While the vast majority of films appeal to audiences seeking out a reiteration of a “comfortable” view of the world (its people and their societies reflected back to them through the silver screen), some attempt to provoke a different response: to confront the audience with vivid sensations of fear, disgust, or dread; to present certain truths that are too close to the bone for comfort. Filmmakers’ fascination with *bodies*—be they at risk, in pain, alive or dead, human or nonhuman—goes back to the earliest days of cinema: from D.W. Griffith’s *Intolerance* (1916), which features two onscreen decapitations and a scene in which a soldier’s naked abdomen is pierced by a spear, through to the slicing of an eyeball and the disembodied hand presented by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí in *Un Chien Andalou* (1929).

For theorist Noël Carroll, to be horrific is to cause and provoke both a sense of horror and a sense of the unpleasant: “if horror only caused fear, we might feel justified in demanding an explanation of what could motivate people to seek out the genre. But where fear is compounded with repulsion, the ante is, in a manner of speaking, raised” (158). The main concern for directors working in the genre of horror is to generate and manufacture fear, disgust or both. Unlike other genres,

such as the western, which can generally be identified by a specific setting, the horror may be identified by its relation to the human body and to the effect that encounters with the monstrous have on the subject. The monstrous here could emanate from an external force, such as a vampire, zombie etc., or from within, as in the case of body horror. For Carroll, the defining trait of the genre is its affective qualities: describing the human subject's response to the monstrous, he notes how the body itself becomes both a site of anxiety and a sight for the spectator: "They freeze in a moment of recoil, transfixed, sometimes paralyzed. They start backwards in a reflex of avoidance. Their hands may be drawn toward their bodies in an act of protection but also of revulsion and disgust" (22-23). With reference to existing critical writing on the genre, this thesis will argue that certain female directors working in horror challenge genre conventions and, in particular, representations of gender and the body. It will examine how specific subgenres, such as body horror and rape-revenge, are reinvigorated and nuanced by the filmmakers' own concerns as well as those of newly-identified audiences. Examining selected films—Jen and Sylvia Soskas' *American Mary* (2012); Leigh Janiak's *Honeymoon* (2014); Claire Denis' *Trouble Every Day* (2001); and Marina de Van's *In My Skin* (2002)—each director's employment of established narrative and aesthetic conventions will be assessed in order to identify how they "progress" representations of the female body and open up questions concerning the traditional binaries of gender and identity. Though the films analysed vary in terms of production contexts, all can be linked by their shared commitment to challenging and rejuvenating the genre.

“Torture the women!” - Alfred Hitchcock

Throughout classic Hollywood cinema, and indeed the majority of contemporary cinema, women have not been given central roles, either in front of the camera or behind it. In his study of representation in western art, Berger has noted that “men *act* - women *appear*” and that images of women have tended to objectify them (47. Emphasis in original). He suggests that this construction might be viewed as a response to the voyeuristic impulse held by the male spectator and, as a consequence, a woman’s perception of herself is constructed via a patriarchal representation: “The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object – and most particularly an object of vision: a sight” (47). Drawing from Berger, and applying it more specifically to the medium of film, theorist Laura Mulvey develops a theory of “the male gaze” (47) in her essay “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” first published in 1975. Influenced by psychoanalytic theory, she argues that in mainstream cinema the heroine only serves as an erotic distraction and that as a character she is not significant: “her visual presence tends to work against the development of a story line, to freeze the flow of action in moments of erotic contemplation. This alien presence then has to be integrated into cohesion with the narrative” (47). Berger and Mulvey have been seminal in the development of feminist film theory and there is little doubt that the filmmakers under consideration in this thesis have been influenced—some more broadly than others—by the radical shift in thinking about matters of visual representation that was inaugurated by both writers. In the chapters that follow, I will examine how these established and emerging directors offer a fresh approach to issues of representation, female agency, and the gaze and, in doing so, help to push

the very boundaries of the horror genre. Before I turn to a more detailed examination of their work, however, a short overview of the evolution of the genre, and most particularly its recent “bodily turn”, will be furnished.

In its earliest cinematic examples the horror genre often posited the monstrous and the threat as something external, but from the 1960s onwards there was a trend towards showing horror as a force emanating from within: from the mind, as can be seen in *Psycho* (1960) or from the body, as featured in the work of David Cronenberg (whose early films also fostered new approaches to special effects). As Boss notes, consideration of the genre’s graphic imagery and its handling of grisly material was minimal within early academic studies of the genre, by writers such as Prawer and Butler, who seemed to have some anxiety that such scenes were gratuitous (Boss “Death, Disintegration of the Body” 49). Instead, films that *suggested* states of monstrosity or meditated on the nature of fear (e.g. Tourneur’s *Cat People*) tended to win critical appreciation. However, with the decline of censorship in the 1970s there was a definite shift, in both academic writing and within the genre itself. Writing in 1983, Philip Brophy identified this new phase of “Contemporary Horror” as one defined by its tendency to *show* its horror rather than merely allude to it and as one that he suggests favours a “*photographic image*” over a “realistic scene” (2). Brophy was one of several critics that identified a number of recurring themes, including the (gleeful) destruction of the nuclear family and a black humour about the annihilation of the body itself, that emerged in the genre in the post-1970s period. Citing examples such as *Halloween* (1978); *Dawn of the Dead* (1979); *The Brood* (1979); and *Crazies* (1978), he argues that these films

present a distinctly different interpretation of the conventions of the genre and adopt a more “self-aware” approach to the horrific. This shift, he suggests, may be related to both the individual director’s creativity and to Industry imperatives: “the contemporary Horror film *knows* that you've seen it before; it *knows* that you know what is about to happen; and it knows that you know it knows you know. And none of it means a thing, as the cheapest trick in the book will still tense your muscles, quicken your heart and jangle your nerves” (Brophy 5). Citing one scene in John Carpenter’s film *The Thing* (1982), in which a set of alien legs emerges from a disembodied head and scampers across the floor, provoking a crew member to exclaim “You've got to be fucking kidding!”, Brophy points out that the self-referential dialogue humorously “speaks” to an audience that may have thought they *had* seen it all but are now confronted by the most astonishing special effects. The employment of dramatically improved effects and the prolific use of graphic imagery post 1970 enhanced the genre’s ability to depict the most gruesome scenes of destruction against the human body (its unique selling point, as it were) but also tapped into elemental fears: “The contemporary Horror film tends to play not so much on the broad fear of Death, but more precisely on the fear of one's own body, of how one controls and relates to it” (Brophy 8).¹

It was not until 1986 that the term “body horror” was adopted, when *Screen*

¹ The “visceral turn” may be very clear in examples of horror post-1970 but in truth much of the genre can be defined by its relationship to the body. As both Robin Wood and Pete Boss argue, the body always functions as a signifier in horror, whether it is to express racial and sexual fears (e.g. early zombie films such as *White Zombie* (1932)), or anxieties about the loss of individual subjectivity in an increasingly conformist state (e.g. Siegel’s *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* (1956) or the work of George A. Romero) (see Wood *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* 102-04; Boss “Vile Bodies and Bad Medicine”).

published a special issue featuring featured essays by, amongst others, Brophy, Boss and Barbara Creed. As these theorists elaborated, body horror may be interpreted as a reflection of societal anxieties about the self—the individual; the body—all age-old preoccupations that have been brought into sharper focus by the increased presence of science and modern medicine in our lives. Our increased awareness of our bodies and our fixation with protecting them from both external and internal forces are this new subgenre's primary concerns². The emergence of the subgenre, most notably with the early work of David Cronenberg, John Carpenter and John Landis, reflects both established and newer fears of biological diseases: featured themes in the first “wave” of body horror include allegories of cancer and AIDS (expressed via parasites and mutations); physical abnormalities; traumas endured by the body and the mind; crises of identity and sexuality; interactions with technology and with the medical establishment. If the fear of the external monster or the “freak” that embodies our mass anxieties and threatens normality constituted the past address of the horror genre, then, a contemporary application may be the fear of *becoming* the monster, of being labelled the “freak” and having to confront the unstable nature of our bodies. And in contrast to the (apparent) restoration of normality that often defined horrors of the past, more recent examples tend to feature more open ended “closures”: “the monster triumphs (*Henry*); the monster is defeated but only temporarily (*Halloween*); or the outcome is uncertain (*Night of the Living Dead*, *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, *The Thing*, *Nightmare on Elm Street*). The boundary

² Body horror is classified as a subgenre of horror according to a myriad of academic journals and books. According to *Film Studies* body horror is a “[s]ubgenre of horror which focuses upon the invasion of the body or the body betraying its ‘owner’ in some way” (Butler 140); *Oxford Dictionary of Film Studies* states that body horror is a “contemporary variant of the horror film with a particular focus on human bodies that are subject to torture, mutilation, mutation, decay, degeneration, and transformation, usually shown in graphic detail via the use of special effects” (Kuhn & Westwell 39).

between living and dead, normal and abnormal, human and alien, good and evil, is blurred, or sometimes indistinguishable" (Pinedo 90).

Within the history of body horror there is arguably no one more influential than David Cronenberg, "the Body Horror Maestro" (Wulff). A stated influence on several of the directors whose work is examined in this thesis, Cronenberg's films have depicted a multitude of shocking, violent and disgusting treatments of the human body, ranging from an exploding head in *Scanners* (1981), a bloodsucking appendage emerging from the armpit of a young woman in *Rabid* (1977), a vaginal videotape opening on the of a stomach of a man in *Videodrome* (1983), the emergence of mutant babies from an external womb of a pregnant woman in *The Brood* (1979); to a phallic sexual parasite ripping through the abdomen of a young male in *Shivers* (1975) and a man-fly mutant vomiting acid on a human foot to disembody it in *The Fly* (1986). These physical mutations offer novel accessories, orifices and abilities for characters to interact with the physical world and serve to enhance the director's exploration of the relationships between the *self* and the *other*. As Beard has noted, a fascination with humans and their engagement with technology permeates Cronenberg's work (Beard *The Artist as Monster* vii). The medical innovations of biological science in *Rabid*, *Shivers* and *Scanners*; a secret broadcast signal on video and TV in *Videodrome* and the virtual reality computer game in *ExistenZ* (1999); a teleportation device in *The Fly*: all serve to demonstrate the frailty of human flesh and blur the lines between organic and mechanic; human and nonhuman; mind and matter; psychology and physiology; self and other. Shaviri has pointed to the "polymorphousness of living tissue" in Cronenberg's films, which

he suggests “has the capacity to traverse all boundaries, to undo the rigidities of organic function and symbolic articulation” (Shaviro 128-29). This amorphous divide between technology and flesh is often present in the narrative of Cronenberg’s films and indeed in the case of *Dead Ringers* (1988) it is intrinsic to the film’s formal construction (where advanced split screen special effects were used to facilitate a dual performance by Jeremy Irons as twin brothers).³

For the filmmakers whose work is examined in this thesis, Cronenberg has been a seminal influence, not least because he has reinvigorated and challenged the ideological and aesthetic boundaries of the genre, even if by doing so he has attracted a decidedly mixed critical response.⁴ In many of his body horrors Cronenberg locates the instigator of terror and monstrosity in the figure of the male doctor/scientist that acts on the passive (usually female) body. Binaries of victim/victimiser seem duly set up, even if Cronenberg continually problematises such clear distinctions. What is clear, however, is how frequently the ‘acted upon’ body in these films is represented in an abject state, a state that is often associated with the female and/or the feminised. Drawing from Julia Kristeva’s theory of the abject “border”, that “disturbs identity, system, order ... [and] does not respect borders, positions, rules” (4), Barbara Creed offers a thought-provoking analysis of

³ As Marcie Frank argues, the use of split screen here reminds the audience, not only of the technology required to create two characters from the one body, but also the themes of split existence, separation and conjoining that are at the very heart of a narrative (Frank 464).

⁴ In his discussion of *Shivers*, influential writer/theorist Robin Wood offered one of the first serious analyses of the director, arguing that the film involves “the projection of horror and evil on to women and their sexuality” and reflects “the ultimate dread being of women usurping the active, aggressive role that patriarchal ideology assigns to the male” (“American Nightmare” 24). However, Pete Boss later offered a defense of the film, arguing that the sexual parasites depicted could be seen to offer a commentary, both on the human body and the condition of materialism (“Death, Disintegration of the Body” 127-28).

one of Cronenberg's more memorable female characters, Nola in *The Brood*, a woman that develops the ability to birth the "children of her rage" via an external observable womb. For Creed, Nola is truly an "abject" character, immersed in the messiness of the female and the maternal body, expelling both blood and matter (furthering an association with menstrual blood) and grotesque "children". Her sexuality is one that appears beyond rational control, and also independent because her capacity for regeneration is not dependent on male intervention (instead, she has a "monstrous womb"). As Creed notes, Cronenberg's complex representation of Nola and her "mutated" body taps into a larger discourse that views the womb as "horrifying *per se*" and that has often "been used to represent woman's body as marked, impure and part of the natural/animal world" (Creed, *Monstrous Feminine* 49). Elaborating on this, McLarty remarks "Nola is the source of disgust because of her ability to give birth parthenogenetically. Nola herself draws attention to this in a scene in which she gives birth to one of the mutant children. Her mouth covered with blood from licking her newborn clean, she articulates her husband's, and presumably the audiences', thoughts: 'I disgust you, I sicken you'. The mother, then, is doubly horrific: she both causes and is the monster" (264). It is easily argued that Nola is the very visible and visceral expression of body horror, an abject body that disgusts and overpowers, but Cronenberg's narrative undermines (or perhaps simply complicates) this aesthetically focussed interpretation: after all, she is the victim of a male doctor's unorthodox psychological practices.

The referencing here of Cronenberg, and most especially *The Brood*, is relevant in so far as the presentation of the body as maternal and as abject, and the

intentional blurring of lines between *being* misogynistic and *exposing/revealing* misogyny, anticipate much of the ambivalence with which the female characters and their actions are represented in the films under consideration in this thesis. In the chapters that follow, I will examine the advent of a new “wave” of body horrors directed by female directors working from outside the mainstream Hollywood system. Investigating why these directors have been drawn to the horror genre and, more specifically to the body horror, I will examine how their films negotiate the conventions and parameters of it; why they set out to make films that are deliberately visceral and confrontational; and how their films might “reclaim” the subgenre from charges of misogyny and “take back” the representation of the female body and female identity. Though they are diverse in style and execution, all of them present challenging, thought-provoking entries in this fascinating subgenre.

Chapter 1: *American Mary*

In more recent years we “have seen an exciting wave of horror films helmed by women who haven't merely joined the rank-and-file as encouraging statistics. Instead, movies like Jennifer Kent's *The Babadook* or Karyn Kusama's *The Invitation* have helped elevate the genre by opening it up to stories that unsettle audiences in new, different and unexpected ways” (Reilly). Other examples, such as *American Psycho* (2000), *Jennifer's Body* (2009), *Silent House* (2011), and *A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014), have gained the attention of critics that identify a certain momentum. In her analysis of contemporary horror fans Brigid Cherry notes that “women can comprise up to 50 per cent of horror film audiences”, viewers that “actively enjoy horror films and read such films in feminine ways” (ii). There is, then, an identified audience to which directors and producers can market their films, sometimes even before the camera rolls. As outlined in the Introduction, with its focus on key (and very human) concerns of the self, identity, sexuality and maternity, the genre offers compelling creative possibilities for both novices (the Soskas; Janiak; de Van) and veterans (Denis).

This chapter will analyse *American Mary*, written and directed by newcomers to the Industry, Canadian twins Jen and Sylvia Soska. Telling the story of a female medical student who is raped and who then utilises her knowledge of extreme body modification to exact her revenge, the film has garnered a cult following among

horror cinema fans. I will explore how the directors, through an engagement with the subgenres of rape-revenge and body horror, offer a challenging take on the horror genre by manipulating the conventions (plot; character; themes; visual aesthetics) and representations associated with it. Engaging with a variety of overlapping topics, such as rape-revenge, body image and identity, cosmetic surgery and, of course, body horror, *American Mary*'s theme of self-imposed body modification surgery provides the filmmakers with an experimental playground in which to redefine, reshape and reframe the body, both visually and conceptually, as well as serving to highlight the unfortunate consequences of the patriarchal body image. First, I will briefly delineate the Soskas' background in an attempt to contextualise why they are drawn to the genre and what motivates and inspires them to offer subversive qualities in their film. An analysis of their employment of rape-revenge narrative and body horror elements, as well as their references to the culture of body modification, will help illuminate how they negotiate and reinvigorate genre conventions and, in doing so, contribute to a "second wave" of body horror.

Horror could be considered an ideal genre for independent filmmakers as it allows them to explore and manipulate cinematic conventions outside of mainstream Hollywood influence. The horror viewer culture, and associated festivals, is an accepting and open-minded one that encourages experimentation and provides a forgiving environment (terms such as B-Movie, Low Fi, and Grindhouse are often attached) that allows low budget filmmakers, who exploit the advent of cheaper technologies and production practices such as amateur crew

members and unknown actors, a gateway into the larger industry. The emergence of a number of niche and independent film festivals and initiatives worldwide, such as the “Women in Horror Month” which “focuses on supporting the achievements of women who utilize the most extreme mirror available in storytelling: horror” (WiHM), and “Axwound” a film festival dedicated to the screening of short and feature length horror films made by women, have opened up specific avenues for female directors. The Soskas’ commitment to working outside the mainstream is evidenced by their employment of new funding models: according to IMDB, their first self-funded film *Dead Hooker in A Trunk* (2009) cost just \$2,500 to make and was financed using credit cards as a primary source (a model famously initiated by director Robert Rodriguez). It earned them a lucrative deal with IFC Midnight, a company that specialises in Independent film with a particular focus on horror and is one of North America’s largest distributors. Their debut was especially successful on the festival circuit and among horror genre aficionados; for their second film, *American Mary*, they again used a self-funded model, this time partly relying on their parents to re-mortgage their house (IMDB).

In interviews the Soskas have frequently referred to their love of the horror genre and in particular the work of their fellow Canadian, David Cronenberg. In his analysis of that director William Beard has argued that Canada, and indeed Canadian film culture, has long struggled with a sense of specific identity in the face of American dominance and that Canadian cinema is often very self-conscious about its own status in the shadow of USA/Hollywood cinema (Beard "The Canadianness of David Cronenberg" 4). Indeed, as already noted, Cronenberg’s films have been

defined by their concern with borders, albeit ones of gender and the body rather than nationhood or ethnicity. For the Soskas, Cronenberg's oeuvre offers compelling evidence of the creativity of an innovative *auteur*: "I love unique storytellers, the ones that have an unapologetic voice in their art. Cronenberg has always been that" (Soskas, *Revolver*). The Soskas' exploration of the body as a site of manipulation, and indeed the body as a visual sight, draws from Cronenberg's influential work in the arena, but also more generally from a variety of poetic horrors that include such films as Franju's *Eyes Without a Face* (1960) and Almodóvar's more recent, *The Skin I Live In* (2011).⁵ Vocal in their declarations of allegiance to the horror genre, the Soskas have also expressed their espousal of what they call "third wave feminism": in one interview with *The Guardian*, they define it as a philosophy in which "a woman can own her sexuality and not shy away from it" (Soskas, *The Guardian*). Their commitment to feminism has been coloured by their own experience of the obstacles faced by young women attempting to break into an Industry dominated by men, one in which misogyny seems rife. Starting out as actors, the Soskas frequently encountered unethical practices during auditions or offers of only the most menial "twin girl, stereotypical, sexploitation roles" (Soskas, *Rogue Cinema*). Their move in to directing, then, was motivated by personal ambition—to seize back power as it were—and to appeal to and inspire a growing sector of female film directors and movie fans. Indeed one of the most interesting aspects of *American Mary* is how much it draws from the Soskas' own experiences of encounters with a misogynistic Establishment, while also offering up new variations of classic horror themes and

⁵ Whereas in those films Dr Génessier (Pierre Brasseur) and Dr Ledgard (Antonio Banderas) use their skills to reconstruct or restore damaged bodies, in *American Mary*, Mary is often called upon to rearrange, break apart or deform perfectly healthy ones.

visual aesthetics (for the horror fans) and “speaking to” emerging “alternative” worlds, groups and sexualities.

Centering on protagonist Mary Mason (played by cult actress Katharine Isabelle), *American Mary* exposes the misogyny at the heart of the medical world. An enthusiastic and talented surgery student, keen to impress her male tutors and in particular the highly respected Dr. Grant (David Lovgren), Mary's financial struggles lead her to drift in to an underworld of criminals and body modification enthusiasts, who call upon her to perform various surgeries. Although she enters this murky world relatively early in the narrative, it's only when she attends a party held by her male tutors that she becomes the victim of violent crime: she is drugged and raped by Dr. Grant (who also videotapes her violation). The traumatised Mary drops out of medical school and begins to plot a revenge against her attacker, which entails luring him to an isolated location where she drugs him and uses his bound-up body to test out a host of body modification procedures that she then offers to her clients. What unfolds is a complex, rather convoluted narrative that draws upon a variety of horror subgenre conventions.

With its focus on Mary's violation and her subsequent revenge, *American Mary* clearly employs the rape-revenge structure as a template, which in turn facilitates the expression of the Soskas' feminist views. The original rape-revenge films emerged in the 1970s, especially in American cinema, and may be seen as reflective of the anxieties of a society in which established gender roles were being questioned and undermined, as Wood, Lowenstein and many others have argued

(Lowenstein 114-17; Wood, *Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan* 152-53). In genre terms, the rape-revenge film was just one development in what became a new wave of horror films that were released in the era and that was defined by a more brutal and visceral aesthetic. Alongside, and intertwined with it, was the body horror film and the stalker/slasher/slice 'n' dice film, the latter best exemplified by such entries as Wes Craven's *The Last House on the Left* (1972); Tobe Hooper's *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1975); and John Carpenter's *Halloween* (1978). Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the slasher/stalker film was the importance of a central female character, one that Carol Clover would later define as the "Final Girl", "an intelligent, watchful, level-headed [character] ... the first ... to sense something amiss and the only one to deduce from the accumulating evidence the patterns and extent of the threat" (Clover 49). She uses her ingenuity, and at times some considerable physical strength, to confront the dominant male monster/killer and overcome him.⁶ In interviews the Soskas have cited the "Final Girl" as an important influence on their writing of the character of Mary: "I watched Sigourney Weaver in her role [i.e. *Alien*] that redefined what it is to be a final girl, no longer an innocent, trembling waif, but a powerful, fearless heroine... (Soskas, *Indie Wire*).

The new wave of horror in the 1970s had put gender centre stage, often in controversial and confrontational ways and it's nowhere more evident than in the

⁶ Yet, as Clover notes, the "empowerment" of women in these films must be viewed with some degree of scepticism, or is at least qualified, given the frequency with which female heroines are imbued with traditionally "male" characteristics: "To applaud the Final Girl as a feminist development, as some reviews of *Aliens* have done with Ripley, is, in light of her figurative meaning, a particularly grotesque expression of wishful thinking" (Clover 53).

seminal rape-revenge films released.⁷ In such films as *I Spit On Your Grave* (1978) and *Ms. 45* (1981), a rape is enacted by a dominant male (or group of males), in a depiction that is usually brutal, prolonged and traumatic, both for the victim onscreen and, one assumes, the audience. As Clover, Barbara Creed and Jacinda Read have explored, these films certainly identify questions of patriarchal dominance and present various concepts of what constitutes a strong female character, but while this could be viewed as progressive and empowering for women (the victim taking back power) potential problems arise because of the treatment of rape scenes. These are often handled in an ambivalent fashion, both in their visual presentation of the rape and of the female body and positing of the spectatorial gaze. In her study on female audiences' engagement with horror, Cherry notes that many viewers express "strong feelings ... about sexual violence, with many respondents finding this abhorrent whether within the horror genre or elsewhere" (205). When it comes to the Soskas' own take on rape-revenge, it is interesting to note how they employ the established conventions to challenge or offer subversions of them. In "classic" rape-revenge films the protagonist is a female who finds herself isolated and in a vulnerable position: Jennifer (Camille Keaton) from *I Spit on your Grave* is a city girl who is stranded alone in a country cottage; Mari (Sandra Peabody) from *Last House on the Left* is a country girl attacked by a city gang in the middle of an isolated wood; Thana (Zoë Lund) from *Ms.45* is mute and lives alone in an unfamiliar city. In most cases we are not intimately familiar with the character before the rape takes place, presented instead with a fleeting introduction, designed more to set up how vulnerable she is rather than to provide any insight into a

⁷ The rape-revenge film has been variously labelled a genre; a subgenre; or a simply a narrative structure. See Read (28).

complex personality. In contrast, in *American Mary* the narrative establishes a distinct back story for Mary, one that accords her some power and dominance (she is a would-be surgeon with a thriving albeit underground business) and suggests that she has already embarked on a life-altering psychological journey, even before she is subjected to the rape. How Mary deals with the rape also differs from earlier films, in that she uses the event as a means to gain power and to fuel her ongoing transformation. In *American Mary* it is not the rape itself that provides a catalyst for Mary's transformation into a powerful figure, but more generally her encounters with widespread, casual misogyny. Just six minutes into the film, in a scene in which her character is being interviewed/audition by strip club owner, Billy (Antonio Cupo), Mary faces (and faces down) the first of many men that appear to view women as "meat". As Billy hooovers up drugs and makes sleazy comments about her CV ("It is nice to find out about some of your dirty secrets, Mary"), Mary resists being demeaned, instead confidently asserting both her skills and her ambition: "I'm very good, and I'm also very broke, and I need to make money, so...". When the interview/audition is abruptly interrupted by one of Billy's henchmen, who requires his boss to deal with an emergency, Mary is shown alone and it is only then that the Soskas give a close-up of her face that allows the audience a glimpse of her emotions of vulnerability and discomfort. When Billy returns in a frenzied state, however, the camera position changes and Mary is now presented in a position of power, as Billy asks for her help, "do you want to make five grand?" She follows him to a makeshift operating theatre in the basement, replete with rusting fridges, beer barrels, cleaning equipment and there, on an old wooden table, discovers a bleeding and shaken man, his eye gouged out and his torso bearing a dramatic incision that runs

right up to his bottom lip. The scene is a significant and revelatory one for both Mary and the film. The Soskas construct a symbolism-laden *mise-en-scène* here, showing the “innards” of the building as Mary makes a physical journey that will, more symbolically, lead her on a journey of psychological change. The scene of course also references other horror films in which the protagonist “descends” into another physical space and is forever psychologically or corporeally changed (e.g. Ripley’s exploration of the body of the spaceship in *Alien*; the creepy basements hiding secrets in *Psycho*; *Texas Chainsaw Massacre*), and more generally nods to classical mythology where with the subterranean world is figured as a place of threat, self-discovery, unfettered sexuality or death. It is also a continuation of a classic horror setting in which the “mad doctor” can be found experimenting or transforming bodies. Early in the film, then, Mary is established as an empowered character that successfully performs this life-saving surgery and exhibits a certain kind of moral/ethical flexibility. Importantly, in contrast to the protagonists of the “first wave” of rape-revenge films, she is granted agency *before* she is raped. In constructing her character in this way the Soskas offer a revisionist take on the rape-revenge protagonist and also introduce a level of ambiguity to Mary’s character, one that blurs the delineation between victim and villain. And so when her rape does occur it fulfils a different narrative function: the sexual violation spurs her to revenge but also facilitates a development of her surgical skills and an expression of her ambition.

As the Soskas offer a reconsideration of the narrative structure of rape-revenge films they also employ a new approach to showing rape on screen. As

noted, the graphic scenes of rape in earlier examples served to highlight the brutality and ugliness of sexual violence towards women (and also reflected more lax censorship), but they also contained troubling elements because of their use of voyeuristic camera work; their privileging of the male attacker's perspective; their depiction of a gang or team sport mentality; and their objectification of nude/semi-clad women on screen. In her study of these films, Clover analyses *I Spit On Your Grave*, discussing how the gang rape that accounts for 50% of the film's screen time is not driven by the act of sexual gratification but rather by male spectatorship and competitiveness (the need for acceptance or approval as part of a team sport mentality). The disturbing scene, she argues, may offer the male audience an opportunity to "partake", voyeuristically, in the rape, occupying as they do a privileged spectatorial position (122-123). Though it is still presented as one of the most unsettling scenes in the film, the rape scene in *American Mary* tends to avoid placing Mary in a position that might unambiguously objectify her. This staging reflects the Soskas' own stated discomfort with how rape had been depicted on screen: "[W]hen rape is done on film, it's almost sexually-gratifying to the male audience. Oh here's the scene to fastforward to. It's horrible, considering the women in those situations, the powerless feeling you have. I thought, let's do something different, and let's have that horrific experience in there. It's not just a physical rape, but a rape of everything she holds dear" (Soskas, *Diy Magazine*).

If the women of earlier rape-revenge films showed naivety in venturing out to isolated woods, Mary's mistake is to assume she will be treated equally by the respectable medical establishment: she foolishly interprets her invitation to Dr.

Grant's party as a gesture of respect and acceptance; a rite of passage; only to find herself one of their latest victims. On both narrative and aesthetic levels the Soskas concentrate on *contextualising* the rape, locating it within a culture in which women are regarded as "meat", an object of diversion and a means to express and reinforce male power. In the scene, Mary is shown engaging in a conversation with Dr. Grant concerning her commitment to her studies and to the surgical community. Soon, however, she begins to feel hazy and slowly drifts into a semi-conscious state as we become aware that her drink has been spiked. The camera offers a glimpse of the context that facilitates Mary's individual violation as in the background a "gang" of male medical practitioners masturbates as they videotape another young woman, who is also in a semi-conscious state, performing an ambiguous sexual act. In contrast to the more visceral presentation of rape in earlier films, the Soskas place most of the events in the background, choosing not to present them as the main element in the frame but instead underlining the pervasiveness (and acceptance) of misogyny. It is interesting that they opt to use the sharpest-focused shots for filming Mary, as we witness the effects of the drugs on her visual perspective and her body. A point-of-view shot presents her view of the world as the focus blurs in and out, and the rape is alluded to rather than presented



Fig 1.1 *American Mary* (35min 49sec) Selective focus.



Fig 1.2 *American Mary* (35min 56sec) Mary's blurred perspective

While the depiction of a group of males who objectify women in this scene is undoubtedly unsettling, the use of selective focus does serve to deny the “team sport spectatorship” that Clover suggests operates in *I Spit On Your Grave*. The camerawork aligns the audience with Mary’s point of view and thus, it is hoped, encourages us to identify and empathise with her situation. As the scene unfolds, and Mary is quickly led in to a private room with Dr. Grant, the camerawork shifts. While it remains handheld for the duration of the scene, as Dr. Grant videotapes and strangles Mary it briefly cuts to his point of view, seen through the camcorder he is

using to tape the rape. Disturbingly—and perhaps to force the audience to feel considerable discomfort—the viewer is now compelled to adopt his viewpoint as Mary, who remains dressed for the duration, is denied a perspective. As the scene continues, the camera settles on a close-up of her upside down and semi-conscious face, remaining there for the duration of the act and thus encouraging us to contemplate the *effect* of the act, rather than the act itself: her expression of helplessness and disbelief, raped by her hero and mentor, precipitates a breakdown of the structure of her world (it's literally turned upside down).



Fig 1.3 *American Mary* (36min 46sec) Mary's world is turned upside down

Unlike the conventional depiction of rape scenes from the films of the 1970s and 1980s here there is no nudity and Mary is not physically overcome or hunted down. Rather in an even more insidious way, the use of drugs (assumedly easy to access for these surgeon-rapists) weakens her temporarily. Significantly, and in a future departure from earlier examples in *American Mary*, the rape scene takes over just two minutes (on comparison to the thirty-five minute sequence in *I Spit on Your*

Grave). In this way, the Soskas pointedly limit the potential for sadistic voyeuristic reception.

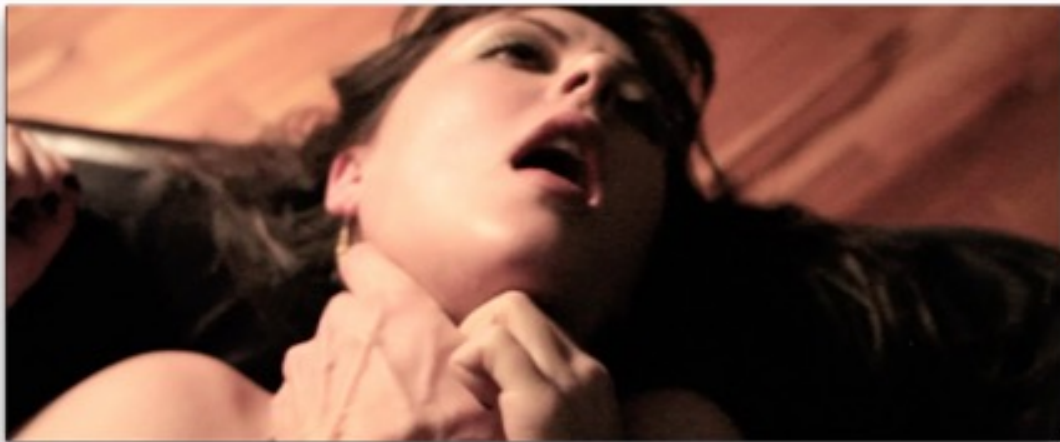


Fig 1.4 *American Mary* (36min 26sec) Grant's point of view

While the depiction of rape in *American Mary* offers a refreshing perspective, the Soskas' depiction of revenge *also* exhibits revisionist features. Mary doesn't hunt down and kill Dr. Grant and his colleagues—which would have aligned the film with the plot of *I Spit on Your Grave*—nor does she take revenge against all males in society that show misogynistic tendencies, as is the case in *Ms. 45*. Rather, she decides to use Dr. Grant as a means to practice her skills, to achieve something from her violation that will empower and enrich her. The early part of *American Mary* would seem to promise a new entry into the rape-revenge subgenre, however, the unfolding of Mary's revenge allows the Soskas to hone in on what really interests them—and what aligns them to other directors under examination in this thesis—an investigation into the intimacies of the body and its potential as a site for (gender) reinvention.

As noted, Mary's method of revenge is not a sudden burst of blood-letting violence, but rather a methodical and experimental deconstruction of Dr. Grant, whose body becomes a canvas through which she expresses both her anger and her talent. By granting her the powerful position of anti-Establishment "surgeon" the Soskas ensure that Mary "directs" her own revenge and regains control over her own body. This tracing of the theme of body and control aligns *American Mary* with early examples of the body horror subgenre that emerged in the 1970s. As has been detailed in the Introduction, in those films the subject's body is often represented as prone or passive, the "victim" of external scientific or medical experimentation or simple bad luck: in *Shivers* experimental doctors design a pathogen intended to heal damaged organs but instead create a ferocious parasite that "transforms" those infected with it; in *Scanners* ambitious scientists invent an experimental drug called ephemerol that leads to the birth of "scanners" (humans with mind control powers)

If the subjects of early body horrors are often not even aware of the procedures or the effects of drugs and usually don't welcome their subsequent mutations, in *American Mary* most of Mary's subjects are willing and enthusiastic guinea pigs. Continuing the subgenre's fascination with how bodily transformations impact the subject's fundamental identity, *American Mary* offers a new twist by moving from the world of "legitimate" medicine to that of the murkier world of extreme body modifications. Evidently, the Soskas are fascinated with what seems to many a bizarre and niche culture, but perhaps their interest is not all that surprising, given their feminist views, their espousal of LGBT rights and their alignment with cult/alternative groups. In many ways the body modification movement might be

viewed as another variation of humans' ubiquitous concern with transforming their bodies, be it through the simple maintenance of cutting hair, trimming nails and the use of cosmetic "enhancements" such as hair dye and make up, or the more permanent procedures of piercing or tattooing flesh. All help us project an image that represents an ideal version of ourselves, one that sometimes "fits in" or conforms to a socially defined normality. This manipulation of our bodies might be viewed as an acknowledgment that we are simultaneously holders and objects of a gaze that appraises, judges and subjects. Living within a culture that embraces technologies of visual (self) expression (art, cinema, photography, computer generated/manipulated imagery or cosmetic surgery), we are bombarded with images of what is considered "ideal" beauty and emerging technologies such as Photoshop® or filters grant us evermore accessible tools with which to create idealised versions of ourselves, and project them to a wider virtual society.⁸ And yet with such transformations and iterations of "ideals" of beauty comes a reinforcement of a whole host of anxieties about bodily imperfection and individual failure. As Vivian Sobchack notes in her study of the links between cinema and cosmetic surgery, both create "us as an image we not only learn to enact in a repetition compulsion but also must—and never can—live up to" (Sobchack 50). In her study of the "cosmetic gaze" and technology Wegenstein makes the pertinent point that for the body to be considered "ideal" we must first remove any traces that it has been altered: "An ideal of a subtly refreshed version of the real me requires the erasing of every trace of the technology that was used to create it, thus 'falsely'

⁸ Similar to the reverence with which cinematic special effects are viewed in websites and in specialist magazines such as *Fangoria*, the idea of a surgically achieved aesthetic of bodily perfection is also celebrated (and marvelled at) in popular culture through reality TV shows such as *Extreme Makeover* (2008) and *The Swan* (2004).

mediating health and the possibility for healthy reproduction" (107). While embracing such technology might seem, then, to be an empowering act, one that facilitates the carving out of a unique identity for ourselves and is thus subversive, the reality can, in fact, be quite the opposite. In a culture that relentlessly celebrates the external, the image, perfection and youth, technologies of both surgery and of image making (Photoshop® etc.) seem to lead to an endorsement of a mass *conformism* to society's expectation of the ideal body, raising the prospect of a future inhabited by indistinguishable subjects, all bearing wrinkle-free skin; a straight nose; a firm jaw line for men; pert breasts for women.

For the Soskas, the contradictions of this era of body consciousness are endlessly intriguing and *American Mary*, as we will see, both interrogates and reinforces them. The ambivalence with which the film views the body, gender identity, and the empowerment potential of using the body as an expressive canvas, mirrors that of the first wave of body horrors and its uneasy relationship to the culture from which it emerged. As Boss has examined, the films of Cronenberg, Landis, Dante and Carpenter could be seen to reflect the dark side of a keep-fit culture then dominant in the 1970s ("Death, Disintegration of the Body" 112). For those directors, the "self-empowerment" message, the reiteration of the mantra that radical transformations of the body can be achieved by a combination of willpower and exercise, seemed hopelessly delusional and naïve, quite simply because the body will always dominate.

If the first wave of body horrors suggested that anxieties about the body (loss of control; mutation) can affect both genders, in *American Mary* the Soskas seem more interested in tracing a specific link between social/cultural expectations and women. In many cultures, both Western and non Western, there appears to be an added expectation for women to conform to a male-defined ideology, or a heteronormative definition of female beauty, as Naomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* (Wolf) and Lois Banner's *American Beauty* (Banner) have elaborated. Despite the advent of feminism, the media and popular culture remains saturated with images of women defined as sexual objects to be scrutinised by the male gaze (see Berger; Mulvey). With the emergence of new technologies and the immediacy of new media platforms (Instagram®; Facebook®; Snapchat® etc) it seems that many women willingly collude in their objectification. However, for a number of writers on the phenomenon, the selfie contains the potential for empowerment for the female subject, who is now seen to be in charge of her self-representation: "a politically oppositional and aesthetic form of resistance" (Murray 490); a medium for women "to send their own powerful, often feminist messages" (Bates). It's a subject that is enthralling for the Soskas, who themselves are not shy when it comes to self-promotion. Their film's presentation of the body—willingly and unwillingly ripped apart, reconfigured, made grotesque—can be seen as their own response to the pervasive narcissism that defines their contemporary culture. The focus on body modification allows for a commentary on contemporary culture, but more specifically reveals the complexities of an experimental subculture that regards itself as apart from the mainstream. Importantly, too, the investigation of the world of body modifications acts as a frame for the Soskas' expression of their own brand of

third-wave feminism in which diversity, expression of individual identity, celebration of sexuality and a rejection of conventional gender roles are central.

The “bodily turn” in *American Mary* opens up a canvas for both narrative and aesthetic experimentation. The latter is signalled with opening shots that depict a cold and darkly lit close-up of skin as a surgical blade pierces it and slices through the frame from the bottom to the top, revealing dark flesh underneath. The cut—in this case a symbolic gesture—allows the audience to enter the dark world of the film’s subject matter “that place of transfixation where the movement distinguishing outside from inside comes to a stop” (Wegenstein ix), while also alluding to the theme of transformation and possibilities. This striking shot is followed by one of a table of medical instruments on a cold wet slab, followed by extreme and ambiguous close-ups depicting the sewing and rearranging of organic materials. These allow us to see the texture of skin and tissue, as well as an obscured view of a practical surgical procedure. By opening the film in this way, the Soskas immediately position the body as a spectacle, a sight (and site) to be opened up for examination and one where the surgeon is posited as an empowered visionary creator. The black humour of the film soon surfaces as it’s revealed that the flesh in the frame is no more than that of a modified turkey, with five wings surgically attached to the breast, created by Mary to test out her stitching skills (but also hinting at the blurring of boundaries between the human and nonhuman that is at the heart of both body horror and body modification). This unconventional presentation of a “surgical procedure” is further underlined as the camera cuts from a shot of the mutilated animal to the surgeon, dressed in a black negligée and wearing black surgical gloves, attire that

seems more appropriate to a fetish club. Undoubtedly a shrewdly commercial decision motivates the Soskas to present Katherine Isabelle in this fashion—even if they might justify it as an expression of their “third-wave feminism” in which a woman can embrace her sexuality and control how she is established as an object of the spectatorial gaze—but it also pays specific homage to Cronenberg and *Dead Ringers* in which the surgeons are attired in (highly impractical) red silk scrubs that reinforces an association with cardinals/religious zealots; their surgery a variant on religious rites of reconfiguration.⁹

In subsequent scenes the Soskas expand on the links between Mary the surgeon and Mary the artist, facilitator of radical transformations. The surgical procedures she carries out are precise, controlled, elegant: her hands touch her clients' flesh as a sculptor would examine a fine detail in a clay statue; like a painter's brush, her scalpel traverses the landscape of skin. As Mary begins on one of her clients, Ruby (Paula Lindberg), elegant and melodic piano music evokes a sense of calm expectation. Close-ups give us an intimate window into her craft: her surgical markings are presented as beautiful drawings with the assurance of precision.

⁹ The Soskas acknowledged the link in one interview: “We even homage *Dead Ringers* in the twin surgery scene by putting Mary in the red scrubs” (Soskas *Revolver*).



Fig 1.5 *American Mary* (22min 23sec) Mary's surgical pen markings

In her book, *Carnal Thoughts*, Sobchack describes the skin as elastic, full of colour and texture, a fragile picture of our personal history and experiences, the scars and wrinkles like the physical diary of our life's story (Sobchack 36). While Mary is performing surgery on Ruby, who has already undergone a multitude of procedures, she runs her fingers along her unconscious body, touching her scars in sympathetic gesture. The gesture is an important one, conveying a sense that Mary regards herself as a facilitator, ostensibly a non-judgmental one, but that the procedure she carries out fill her with a sense of regret that her patient feels compelled to undergo such extreme surgery in order to achieve her desired identity.



Fig 1.6 *American Mary* (22min 26sec) Mary as she observes Ruby's scars



Fig 1.7 *American Mary* (22min 32sec) a close up shot of Ruby's surgical scars

One of the more innovative aspects of *American Mary* is how it examines the positioning of the body in the development of identity and empowerment. As Mary interacts with clients in the world of body modification she soon realises how much they view their body as their own canvas, through which they can fulfil what they view as subversive self-expression and a rejection of “normality”. Granted, many of the procedures she carries out hardly conform to a heteronormative concept of beauty—for example, tongue splitting; 3D skin implants, such as horns on the forehead or spinal protrusions; voluntary amputation; dental filing/reshaping; genital modification and castration—but they do suggest a bold rethinking of the limits of the human body and of gender. However, as with the body horrors of the 1970s, *American Mary* expresses some ambivalence towards this body modification culture, questioning whether it is entirely separate or uninfluenced by the society it seeks to reject. This sense of doubt is especially played out in the scenes involving two important characters: Beatress (Tristan Risk) who has had fourteen surgeries to resemble 1930s cartoon character “Betty Boop”, and Ruby Realgirl, a client of Mary

who requests to have her nipples excised, her vagina sealed and her genitalia removed so that she may take on the physical appearance of a Barbie Doll.

Both are extreme cases and both involve specifically gendered modifications that attempt to fulfill the subjects' narcissistic ambition to achieve what they view as a unique sexual identity outside of societal or patriarchal norms. Ruby no longer wants to be seen as a sexual object and wishes to move outside of the male gaze, by (she believes) taking her identity into her own hands. Yet her ideal, a sex-less doll, might be regarded as simply another reiteration of patriarchally constructed ideals of female beauty. In a scene discussing her reasons for seeking body modification, this contradiction is alluded to by the Soskas, who point to Ruby's naivety: "I don't think it's really fair that God gets to choose how we look on the outside, do you? No one looks at dolls in a sexual manner, do you know why?", Ruby declares, to which Mary replies: "maybe it's because they don't have all their parts?" The ambivalence expressed here is also underlined by the staging of her subsequent surgery. As Ruby lies prone on the slab, the camera shifts to a wide shot and we are provided with an obscured view—Mary's back to the camera with Ruby's legs spread out on either side—as she removes her labia, the remnants of which fall to the floor, discarded and cast aside. The shot reinforces that for Ruby her sexual organs, which "identify" her as biologically female, are a reminder of what Kristeva has theorised as the abject self (the shot of the discarded labia underlines, too, the association with abjection). Ruby may regard her body as her own canvas, the tool through which she models a new identity, yet the procedures she demands threaten her life and move her closer to a state of liminality and abjection (a human doll). Her character's profound

confusion, and her naïve belief that she can exist in a world where misogyny will no longer affect her, ultimately reveals her to be as brainwashed and as powerless as any of the protagonists of Cronenberg, Carpenter etc.

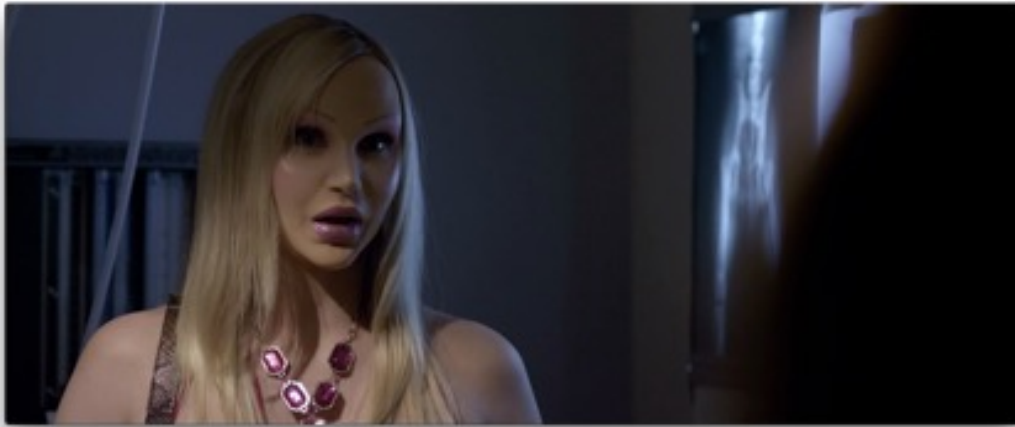


Fig 1.8 *American Mary* (19min 16sec) Ruby Realgirl



Fig 1.9 *American Mary* (23min 47sec) discarded material during Ruby's transformation

The character of Beatress expresses a similar misguided belief that the medical procedure she seeks can facilitate a defiant expression of self-constructed identity. If Ruby wants to be a genderless doll, Beatress aspires to what she views as the "perfect" woman: Betty Boop. It's a rather a disturbing ideal of beauty, given the

cartoon's combination of infantile and animal-like features (doe eyes) and highly sexualised adult ones (prominent breasts and bottom; pout etc).



Fig 1.10 *American Mary* (16min 34sec) Beatress

Mary duly carries out the procedures, but Beatress soon becomes the victim of all-prevailing misogyny when she is beaten up by Ruby's husband, who is intent on punishing all those he views as female transgressors. As the Soskas delineate through both characters, no matter how "subversive" and "empowering" their body modifications might at first appear, they actually reflect an insidious absorption of patriarchal ideals about how women should behave or look.

In aligning her with such experimental procedures the Soskas continue a fascination with the "mad-doctors" that have populated the horror genre, from Caligari in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920), Victor in both Mary Shelley's novel and in Whale's film version of *Frankenstein* (1931), right through to the disturbed surgeons of *Re-Animator* (1985); *The Human Centipede* (2009) and *Dead Ringers*. Like these surgeons, Mary "penetrate(s) bodies in order to regenerate, modify or 'give birth' to a new creation ... more monstrous than his creation" (Creed, *Phallic*

Panic 50). Yet the Soskas' explicit exploration of issues of identity and gender, and their replacement of the male doctor with the female surgeon, ensures *that American Mary* is an intriguing entry in to the new wave of body horror. As with the mad scientists of earlier films, Mary is presented as a complicated character whose motivation combines selfish and altruistic elements. While her choice to help others achieve their own body ideals sets her apart from her male counterparts of the past (who impose their wild imaginations upon the bodies of their victims), in the course of the narrative Mary gradually becomes a less-sympathetic or altruistic character and, following her rape, becomes one inspired by what Barbara Creed has identified as the monstrous "Femme Castratrice" of rape-revenge (*Monstrous Feminine* 122).

It has already been established that Mary displays a certain ethical flexibility when it comes to undertaking illegal procedures, however in the aftermath of the rape, this mutates in to a kind of "monstrosity", most clearly in her interactions with the men that become her victims (not her clients). In contrast to the elegance of the scenes of Ruby or Beatress' surgeries, male bodies are subjected to brute violence, in the case of a security guard that Mary bludgeons to death, or grotesque and horrific disfigurement, in the case of Dr. Grant. The Soskas' depiction of that character is almost gleeful in its degradation. The once powerful figure is reduced to the ultimate in submissive object or gimp, to be tortured and teased by the latex-clad dominatrix, Mary.



Fig 1.11 *American Mary* (96min 09sec) Dr. Grant strung up on meat hooks

The scenes are provocative and titillating, designed to appeal to certain sections of the audience (or lure them in), but there is a more serious intent behind them. Mary's torturing of Grant takes on a specific gender inflection, as she binds him to a table and gags him with a speculum, a surgical brace used for gynecological procedures. As seductive jazz music plays, Mary gently teases him about what she is going to do, how *her* needle will penetrate *his* skin. In contrast to her more gentle approach to Ruby's surgery, where gas ensures she will be unaware of the procedure, here she employs local anaesthetic to force Grant to take note of both her skills and his ongoing transformation. She proceeds to hold his tongue in place using an elongated, phallic-like brace and as her scalpel approaches, Grant's splutters and screaming can be heard before the camera cuts away to illustrations of brutal surgical procedures used in the earliest ages of medical practice (again a tribute to Cronenberg's *Dead Ringers* and its famous credits scenes).¹⁰

¹⁰ As Boss notes: "The scalpel and the syringe are easily transformed into instruments of torture and special menace due to the peculiar fantasies of powerlessness with which we customarily contemplate their use" (Boss "Death, Disintegration of the Body" 141)

Our final glimpse is of him strung up on chains and hung with hooks by the skin on his back, like a butchered pig (furthering the body horror exploration of human and nonhuman animal boundaries). As Mary circles around his suspended body, taking photographs, she restores herself to a position of power, the creator of the image, with Grant as the piece of meat, denied subjectivity. To further reinforce his powerlessness, Mary has sewn his mouth shut (so vital to his position as a lecturer) and cut off his hands (eradicating his surgical power). The victimiser has become the victim, the ultimate body horror experiment: a mute, squirming, inarticulate site of living flesh. While the crime committed against Mary warrants punishment, a meting out of justice (in line with the rape-revenge subgenre), the film explores how the actions impact her own identity, thereby raising complex issues about spectatorial identification (itself a core issue within the subgenre). The brutality of her acts against Dr. Grant, as well as in the frenzied bludgeoning of the innocent security guard, trigger her transformation into a figure that is increasingly “excessive, demonic” (Clover 4).

Like many horror films, the ending of *American Mary* lacks complete resolution or clear-cut reestablishment of the status quo: lines between the victim and monster have been so irretrievably blurred that the only closure that can be achieved is through the death of the transgressive force that is Mary. Attacked by Ruby's angry husband, Mary fights back and kills him, but her victory is short lived and not even her considerable surgical skills can save her. As blood gushes from her wounded stomach (a kind of grotesque inversion of a birthing scene), spilling on to her white dress and pristine white floor of her surgical practice, she is shown

irrevocably transformed, into “dead meat”. Her final moments, then, are imbued with a degree of poetic (and aesthetic) reflection concerning the limits of female agency, both within society and within the horror genre itself. It is a fitting end to a film that has, through its fusion of the body horror and rape-revenge subgenres, offered a complicated “heroine” whose ambitions and strong sense of self “speak” to a newly identified female audience, yet who is ultimately, inevitably, contained by an oppressive society. In the next chapter I will examine two films that mirror *American Mary* in their preoccupation with matters of the body, sexual violence, and transformation, and that also contribute to a new wave of body horror.

Chapter 2: *Honeymoon*

The previous chapter examined how the Soskas engage with the culture of extreme body modification, through the prisms of rape-revenge narrative and body horror concerns, and offer new variations on genre conventions that appeal to emerging audiences. This chapter will analyse *Honeymoon* (2014), a horror film made by first-time director Leigh Janiak, that ~~also~~ references the conventions of the genre and in particular its dominant themes of the body, identity and gender. At the core of this film is an exploration of the often-distressing relationship between women and their bodies, and of men's attitudes to them. It tells the story of a newlywed couple adjusting to their married roles but in particular focuses on the character of Bea (Rose Leslie) and her increasingly strange behaviour in the aftermath of an enigmatic "experience" one night in the woods. Co-written and directed by American filmmaker Leigh Janiak, *Honeymoon* is an independent film made on a low budget (\$1m, IMDb) that had a positive critical response but only limited box-office success (Worldwide Gross \$24k, *the-numbers.com*).

Like the Soskas, Janiak has expressed a keen interest in locating her work within genre cinema and appealing to niche audiences. In an interview with *Bad Feeling Magazine* she states, "I think that the indie genre film is incredibly exciting. There's no other place where you can push limits and explore original ideas to the extent that you can with indie horror and sci-fi and there's just this great, huge

audience that not only wants, but embraces original, crazy ideas” (Janiak *Bad Feeling Magazine*). Although she was working on a limited budget, Janiak sets out to appeal to a mainstream audience, both in terms of her casting decisions and her choice of the horror genre. The lead role is played by Harry Treadway, who has appeared in numerous mainstream films such as *City of Ember* (2008, Disney’s *Lone Ranger* (2013), as well as Showtime’s TV series *Penny Dreadful* (2014-2016). Rose Leslie, playing Bea, is an actress with a considerable cult following, mainly because of her work on HBO’s *Game of Thrones* (2011 – 2017). Janiak’s choice of the horror genre indicates her understanding of how “open” a genre it is, one where budgets are modest, first-time directors are welcomed, and where there is a guaranteed audience base that are aficionados of the conventions and lineage of horror.

As with the Soskas, Janiak credits specific films/directors as influences, revealing that she “thought about David Cronenberg and *Alien* a lot as far as the effects go, specifically because I really wanted that tactile, gory feeling, and for them to feel really organic. Those were certainly influences as far as the body horror goes” (Janiak *Indie Wire*). With its particular focus on the bodily changes undergone by its central character, Bea, *Honeymoon* sits comfortably in the subgenre of body horror and, like *American Mary*, offers a unique, subversive take on it. As with many body horrors, in both the “first wave” and in more recent examples, Janiak’s film also explores themes of femininity and maternity.

When writing her screenplay for *Honeymoon* Janiak watched a number of horror films and she has specifically identified *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1957)

and its highly successful remake (1978), both of which are based on an original novel by Jack Finney, as a seminal influence, “I liked the idea that this is a story that we kind of re-tell generation after generation with different kinds of sociopolitical things in mind” (Janiak, *Den of Geek*).¹¹ Though *Honeymoon* isn’t a remake of either version, it is certainly inspired by its concern with issues of identity, the precarious place of the individual within societal and cultural frames, and anxieties about intimacy. Janiak’s examination of the dynamics of an intimate relationship, and the impact that societal expectations concerning gender roles and maternity have on the female subject, also recalls *The Stepford Wives* (1975) and *Rosemary’s Baby* (1968), both based on novels by Ira Levin. Her referencing of a myriad of themes and horror narratives—some of which include body snatching; rape-revenge; sci-fi horror; supernatural; animality; satanic-ritual; witchcraft—alongside her exploration of universal themes of identity confusion and body matters, ensures that *Honeymoon* appeals to a diverse audience. The more specific audience base of horror fans are targeted through the film’s employment of a visceral aesthetic that brings to life concepts of bodily transformation and monstrous maternity. Lastly, Janiak’s allusions to the figure of the witch, with its associations with nature, the abject, the primeval and female identity and empowerment, contribute to the construction of an enigmatic, ambivalent central character that blurs the lines between victim and monster.

The plot of *Honeymoon* concerns a couple, Bea and Paul (Harry Treadaway) who head off to Bea’s family holiday home, a log cabin in the middle of the Ontario

¹¹ *Invasion of the Bodysnatchers* has also been remade once more, as *Bodysnatchers* (1993)

woods, for their honeymoon. In the introductory scenes—ostensibly played as a cute reminiscence of how the couple met and how Paul proposed—we see Janiak setting up expectations of a particular genre, romantic comedy, only to introduce visual symbolism that undermines them. A shot of a “Just Married” cliché of empty cans tied to the back of a moving car is intercut with video diary footage, in this case a *wedding* video diary, in which the first character to appear is Bea. She confesses to camera: “I’m not really sure what I’m supposed to say, I’m now a wife”, and a close-up captures her bewildered expression. Far from being the reassuring scene of a romantic comedy, Janiak’s opening makes clear that her main character is a woman struggling to come to terms with her new identity, and this uncertainty finds expression in a verbal incoherence and a confusion about what she is “supposed” to do. This emphasis on the weight of expectations vis-à-vis gender roles refers back to one of Janiak’s seminal influences, *The Stepford Wives*, with its plot of strong women gradually replaced by robots (with the enthusiastic support of their husbands). That narrative has been read as a product of the specific context of changing gender roles and attendant anxieties in America of the 1960s, as Silver notes “The themes of *The Stepford Wives* dovetail so closely with those of second wave feminism that the film can be viewed as a popularization of some of the most persistent concerns of the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and early 1970s” (Silver 60). In referencing this classic story, Janiak seems to suggest that while second wave feminism has given way to third wave or even “post feminism”, there has been little change in the fundamental pressures (whether external or internal) put on women to conform to certain roles.



Fig 2.1 *Honeymoon* (0min 24sec) Newlywed, Bea, introduces herself to camera as a wife.

The opening to-camera confession scene employs an interesting aesthetic style to reinforce the ambivalence with which Bea regards her new status and to cast doubt on the whole industry of romantic love/marriage. As she talks rather self-consciously to her/Paul's camera (actually Janiak's), cinematographer Kyle Klutz uses a long lens to capture the image, which compresses foreground and background and serves to suggest just how "confined" Bea is. The backdrop of a wedding marquee, dimly lit and shallow in depth, enhances the sense that she is no longer sure of herself as she is caught up in a wedding "fog". Bea's confinement is also underlined by her name (abbreviated from Beatrice, also the name given by Dante to the Guide in his *Inferno*) and the pet name that Paul gives her: "honey bee". The referencing of "honey" in both the pet name and in the film title calls to mind the honeycomb that traps the worker bees and their queen in rigidly controlled roles. Janiak's deliberate choice of a name with animal connotations is important, introducing an association between Bea and Nature that will be developed throughout the film and one that

Bea herself encourages: not only does she choose to shorten her name but when Paul addresses her by his pet name she responds by mimicking an insect “bzzzzzz” sound. Janiak’s use of animal references so early in the film sets up one of the film’s main themes—the cultural associations that are often drawn between women and nonhuman animals—while continuing body horror’s exploration of the boundaries between human bodies and nonhuman animal ones.

As the opening scene draws to a close, Bea describes how the two were under the covers of a bed in a makeshift tent in a hotel bedroom when Paul proposed and reveals that her acceptance of the proposal has ushered in a new state of being: “before I was alone and now I’m not”. There follow scenes of the couple departing on their honeymoon and again confined, this time in a car that traverses the suburban landscapes into the deeply forested woodlands. For Mary in *American Mary*, a traumatic incident played its part in the unfolding of her transformation; here, the “happy” event of a marriage serves as a catalyst for the symbolic and corporeal journey undertaken by Bea. It is one in which time blurs, past intrudes on present, and the primitive and primeval trumps the rational and the civilised. Janiak underlines this pervasive influence in scenes that show the newlyweds arriving at their destination, a 1980s built and decorated cabin. Cabins in the wood and/or beside a lake hold particular resonance in the horror genre: this one is the site of Bea’s childhood holidays, a place where she was allowed to run wild, hunting, fishing and being a busy little *Bea*.¹² The specific time capsule décor of the cabin again recalls the aesthetic of *The Stepford Wives* and indeed a variety of films (often from

¹² Examples include *Friday the 13* (1980; 2009); *The Evil Dead* franchise; *The Blair Witch Project* (1999); *Wrong Turn* (2003); *Cabin in the Woods* (2012), among others

the romantic comedy genre) that depict a young couple as they embark on the journey of cohabiting together and “playing house”. However, this is no romantic comedy and the décor is just one of many oppressive forces that seem to weigh the couple down. Here, the macho décor (complete with mounted heads of various animals) confronts Paul with the symbolic presence of Bea’s father, previously the most important man in her life and the one that introduced her to the mysteries of Nature, as well as its brutalities. The “fish out of water” romantic partner is a staple of romantic comedies but Janiak’s film veers into darker territory as cute scenes of the hopeless Paul, overwhelmed by Nature, give way to brooding shots of the fecundity all around: endless vegetation and growth; pulsing life under the surface of the lake. By introducing such visual associations Janiak doesn’t simply suggest that this couple is mismatched, but also hints at Bea’s alignment with animals and a primitive life force that is immersive, vivid, and overpowering. Like many horror films, Janiak employs a very specific visual palette to convey that sense of mysteriousness, in the face of which humans are rendered vulnerable. The centrality of Nature within the narrative and its employment for metaphorical purpose firmly “locates” *Honeymoon* within the genre: the lake here recalls the swamp in Hitchcock’s *Psycho* (1960), that symbolises Norman’s disturbed mind as well as serving a practical plot purpose (it’s where he hides the bodies); or *Last House on the Left* (1972), where an apparently idyllic countryside becomes the hunting ground for rapists and murderers; or Sam Raimi’s *Evil Dead* series, with its intricate and complex use of the woods and vegetation; or rural horror films such as *The Wicker Man* (1973) and *The Witches* (1966), where a secluded population practice the art of witchcraft and extreme forms of ritualism. In all these films Nature is coded as

unknowable, chaotic, primal; in *Honeymoon* it serves as the appropriate backdrop against which Janiak can explore the tensions of male-female relationships, as well as the repulsion often inspired by the human body.

The excitement of the couple's "settling in" dissipates rapidly, as the cabin becomes an increasingly oppressive site, particular for Bea. Janiak draws on her "favorite genre film" *Rosemary's Baby* to create an atmosphere of foreboding ("the thing that I like about it [Polanski's film] is that you're tied very closely to Rosemary's POV but you're in the real world and you have that very realistic kind of fear and terror happening" (Janiak, *Den of Geek*)) and to raise questions about spectatorial identification ("I thought a lot about "Rosemary's Baby," inasmuch as you're so grounded with Rosemary, and her paranoia and doubt, during that entire movie" (Janiak, *Indie Wire*). As in the Polanski's film, *Honeymoon* generally aligns the viewer with Bea's point of view—even if we are not certain it is reliable— encouraging us to identify with her difficult adjustment, but unlike *Rosemary's Baby* it shows considerable sympathy for her husband, who is left confused and helpless by his wife's strange behaviour.

Janiak is particularly interested in drawing links between the body horror elements of the film, i.e. Bea's monstrous change, and the existing tensions between the couple. Though *Honeymoon*'s ostensible premise is that Bea's reconfiguration is triggered by her encounter with a mysterious, external force in the woods, Janiak doesn't entirely endorse the certainty of that explanation. Even in early scenes she compares marriage and the intense honeymoon period with a kind of confinement,

which comes with the threat of a dissolving of individual identity. Though Paul may not exhibit the same kind of misogyny of the Stepford husbands, his interactions with Bea suggest a proprietorial, somewhat dominating attitude that is particularly linked to her body. When, after days of near-constant sex, he makes a fleeting comment about “resting” Bea’s “womb”, the allusion to her maternal potential unsettles her and she quickly declares her reservations about starting a family any time soon. This theme of how females may find the societal expectation to fulfill certain expectations (of lover; wife; mother) oppressive is one that connects the four films under consideration in this thesis; and like all the characters examined, in *Honeymoon* Bea’s internal anxieties soon find expression in corporeal transformation.

Having established an unsettling atmosphere, Janiak continues to withhold narrative clarity or explanation as she depicts Bea venturing into the woods and behaving increasingly strangely in the scenes that follow. This deliberate strategy, of alluding to rather than visually presenting Bea’s encounter, opens up a multitude of possible explanations, from a brief sexual encounter or rape, to alien abduction, exposure to a parasitic infection or demonic ritual or a possession. In some ways this reluctance to offer clarity is a self-conscious device used to “speak to” an established fan base familiar with a range of horror films in which female bodies mutate and the woods is coded as a primeval site. The allusions to various horrors throughout the film reveal Janiak’s acute knowledge of the genre and her respectful attitude to the cinephiles in the audience (Boss has noted this “address” as a key component of the contemporary horror (“Vile Bodies and Bad Medicine” 16). Most obviously,

Honeymoon draws from Sam Raimi's *The Evil Dead* in which the forest itself becomes the violator of the human body (in scenes that contain quite a degree of black humour). In *Honeymoon* Janiak presents enough material to suggest that Bea has been raped by an unknown entity: she later confides to Paul that "something bad happened me, in the woods, I couldn't see, there was a bright light, I could only see the outlines of their bodies, their dark bodies, they went inside me". Janiak's decision not to portray the physical rape can be seen as a conscious one, designed to limit audience exposure to horrific and graphic depictions of female objectification and thus deny the potential of voyeuristic pleasure some viewers might derive. As such, Janiak can be linked with the Soskas in her interest in approaching scenes of violence against women in new ways, however in contrast to *American Mary*, here the (assumed) rape is employed, not to establish a narrative of empowerment and revenge, but rather to trigger an exploration of the female's relation to Nature (the woods); to her body; and to maternity.

The enigmatic allusion to a traumatic encounter reinforces the blurring of lines and boundaries that are so intrinsic to body horror. As has been noted, in body horror the mutation of the physical body results in a crisis of identity for the subject. Here, the earliest symptoms of Bea's transformation are the deepening of an already-existing confusion concerning her identity, especially in relation to her new role as wife and a future as a mother. In the scenes following the encounter, she gradually forgets how to perform the simplest domestic chores, such as making French toast and brewing coffee. As her crisis deepens, the "busy Bea" of earlier scenes begins to fall away, as if she is rotting from the inside. With the dissolution of

her memory, her verbal skills also begin to dissipate: Janiak and Leslie tinge the scenes in which Bea tries to recall her past (and thereby give her clues to her present) with a degree of poignancy. If in the opening scene Bea had seemed lost for words and overwhelmed at the prospect of facing a new future, now she constantly mutters the clues that she hopes will help her recall *how* she is defined: “My name is Bea, my husband’s name is Paul, we live in New York”.¹³ Mental dissociation, memory loss and inarticulacy, then, are the first marks of transformation and, like Esther in Marina de Van’s *Dans Ma Peau* which will be analysed in Chapter 3, Bea resorts to technology and human inventions to help her retrieve her “self”: she is depicted replaying the video diary over and over again, and writing pages of notes to herself. Yet, as with many body horrors, *Honeymoon* seems to demonstrate that technology, science and the rational crumble or are rendered ineffective in the face of more primitive, corporeal forces.

Just as technology appears to fail her, rational explanations are also shown to be inadequate. Confronted by a wife who has suddenly withdrawn from him, and having overheard her practicing speeches that will be used to put off sex, Paul concludes that she must be having an affair with a childhood friend, Will (Ben Huber), whom they had previously met in an eerily quiet village café. As it turns out, Paul’s suspicions are misplaced and his attempt to exert some control over a situation that is baffling to him is ineffectual: he discovers that Will has been declared missing by his wife Annie (Hanna Brown), who is behaving in as strange a fashion as Bea.

¹³ The scene also recalls Jack Nicholson’s character, Jack Torrance, repeatedly typing the same line on his typewriter in Kubrick’s *The Shining* (1980). He, too, is *trapped* with his family, in a confined space.

Having established that Bea has not been unfaithful, Paul seeks out answers in the woods and in the marks on her body: in the former he discovers her lingerie, covered in mucus and ripped to pieces, while his forensic investigation of the latter reveals strange marks on her inner thighs. The visible signs (sticky mucus and the bruising and blotches) confirm that Bea's body has been violated, appropriated by an unknown force, as well as signaling a shift in the film's alignment to genre. Up to this point Janiak had seemed to play with a variety of genres but now she fully commits to body horror and she draws from both the dominant themes (body as canvas; dissolution of boundaries) and aesthetics of that subgenre. It has already been noted that from the opening scene Janiak establishes connections between Bea, Nature and nonhuman animals: in early scenes the comparison to a honeybee seemed apt, given Bea's vivacity and energy, but the link increasingly takes on darker allusions of efficiency, ruthlessness. Bees are not the only creatures with which Bea will be associated. Janiak presents several scenes in which she is aligned with Nature (even before the incident in the woods) and those connections deepen, reinforcing the film's body horror roots and facilitating Janiak's exploration of her key themes of femininity, Nature, corporeality, animality and liminality. In a scene that takes place soon after her encounter in the woods, but before her physical transformation becomes evident, we see her lying low and looking out of a boat, her face illuminated by the reflections of the particularly swampy waters.



Fig 2.1 *Honeymoon* (31min 54sec) Bea stares fixedly at a frog.

A frog can be seen sitting on a floating log, which brings a smile to her face but as the camera lingers on a close-up of it, a net used by Paul swoops down and steals it away. He jokes about eating the frog for dinner, but his humour is not appreciated by his wife and when he attempts to diffuse the awkward situation by making another joke—calling Bea “Froggy Kruger”—it falls flat. Obviously, there is some self-conscious referencing here of the horror genre, but the scene also offers us a clue to just how Bea’s transformation will play out and suggests that on one level she is receptive to it. The shot of the net alludes to the established theme of entrapment, while her rejection of her husband’s conciliatory overtures (she brushes him aside and jumps into the freezing cold water) implies she is already aligning herself with the natural world over the human one. Bea’s temporary immersion in the swamp also anticipates what will be the end result of a slow corporeal transformation: in the final scenes she is shown “reborn” as a semi-aquatic creature, with translucent, sticky skin, yellow eyes and oozing gills. The alignment of Bea with amphibians is

significant. Their perceived “sliminess”, an essential corporeality that is both visceral and visible, is a perfect “match” for body horror, while their ability to move from water on to land reminds us of our own primal existence and of evolution. Yet the association has more specific connotations that Janiak can usefully employ to delineate themes of femininity and the maternal body. The spawning and “incubation” elements of frogs’ life cycle certainly bring to mind Bea’s concerns about her own body as an incubator (for Paul’s baby; for the unknown entity), but frogs also have specific cultural resonances with sorcery/witchcraft that fit nicely with Janiak’s delineating of themes of the archaic, the abject.

As detailed, *Honeymoon* draws from a selection of seminal horror films in which sorcery, femininity and impregnation/rape are central, most notably *Rosemary’s Baby*, *The Blair Witch Project* and Raimi’s *Evil Dead* franchise. There is a strong connection between Janiak’s film and Raimi’s original *Evil Dead* in that both films show evil lurking in the woods and both invest Nature itself with a brooding presence. In *Evil Dead* the locus of evil is explained as emanating from a cabin in the woods, where a witch has been confined to the cellar, the door to which has been weighted down with heavy chains and padlocks. In her exploration of the horror genre, Barbara Creed utilises Kristevan theories of the abject and identifies the figure of the witch as an entity that encapsulates abjection: “The witch is defined as an abject figure in that she is represented within patriarchal discourse as an implacable enemy of the symbolic order” (Creed, *Monstrous Feminine* 76). She goes on to explore how in horror films such as *Black Sunday* (1960), *The Exorcist* (1973), *Inferno* (1980) and *Suspiria* (1977) the witch is presented as a monstrous element

that must be destroyed or killed in order to restore the Symbolic order. In her analysis of *Carrie* (1976), Creed suggests that the eponymous character played by Sissy Spacek is a witch that develops telekinetic power with the commencement of her menstruation (a theme also explored in the *Ginger Snaps* (2000) franchise) and argues that her eventual demise, brought about by fire, alludes to the larger cultural history of witch burning and brings to an end Carrie's natural (yet unnatural) power (76).¹⁴ Though a clear explanation for Bea's transformation is withheld in *Honeymoon*, the delineation of an association with primal Nature, with frogs, with the woods and with the cabin, as well as the film's very specific allusions to *Evil Dead*, align her with cultural constructions of the witch. This is borne out in scenes showing Bea's changing relationship to language: from the start she exhibits a certain degree of ambivalence towards words but this deepens after her encounter and she becomes ever more inarticulate, robotic in her repetition of simple sentences, and gradually more focused on her body. In the *Malleus Maleficarum*, also known as *The Hammer of Witches*, a 15th century guide to identifying, sentencing and torturing witches, it is stated that, witches "lack lungs and tongue, but by art they can create and show a tongue, as well as teeth and lips, according to condition of the body. Hence, they cannot truly talk in their own right, but since they have understanding, when they wish to express the understanding of their mind, it is not vocal expressions but sounds with a certain similarity to vocal expressions that they use. They knock air that has not been drawn in through inhaling" (Mackay and Institoris 583). Granted, the Hammer of Witches is an early modern text, but it is one

¹⁴ In most of the representations of the witch figure in western culture, she is a figure apart from conventional society, associated with Nature, and refusing traditional roles and associations with domesticity (marriage etc.).

from which a number of subsequent writers and filmmakers have drawn, most notably Arthur Miller's play *The Crucible* (1953) and subsequent movie adaptation of the same name (1957), *Witchfinder General* (1968) and *The Witches* (1966). Janiak's film alludes to the figure of the witch, introducing associations between Bea's increasingly strange behaviour and her encounter in the woods and the cultural constructions of the witch figure. It's also interesting that we can detect an interest in this subject by Janiak, not just because there's allusions to the witch figure in this film, but because her current project is a remake of *The Craft* (1996). However, whereas the *Malleus Maleficarum* might be regarded as a patriarchal text that expresses a dread of the witch figure, and an associated fear of female sexuality and feminine power shaped by forces outside of patriarchy, Janiak's referencing of the figure is more complex. Bea is increasingly aligned with the traits of the witch—she exhibits a fascination with Nature, the woods, a realm that seems outside of male influence; she focuses on her body and begins to forget how to behave in her assumed role of wife, social being—in a transformation that is both mysterious and strangely empowering. In the film Bea's performance of (limited) speech is not only increasingly linked to her corporeal transformation but also to her estrangement from Paul, which has been prompted by anxieties over her "surrendering" of her body to him. By denying Paul a sexual purpose in this way or "cutting him off", she effectively "castrates" him and denies him power: according to the *Malleus Maleficarum* the male victims of the witch "are unable to use the force of procreation with a woman" (320).

If witches “castrate” human men, they are receptive to male demonic forces, it seems. The *Malleus Maleficarum* explains witches’ initiation as coming from interactions with an Incubus, male demons that lure women to “perform filthy carnal acts” (282) in their sleep¹⁵, which often results in demon pregnancies. Certainly this suggests that witches are merely the pawns, the incubators, for male (demon) desires, but the *Malleus Maleficarum* also warns that witches have terrifying powers “[they] know the acts and writings of the prophets better than humans do, and many future events are determined by them, they can foretell many future events on this basis” (290). Even as an expression of the uncontested misogyny of *Malleus Maleficarum* there is here an acknowledgment of the power of the witch and her association with archaic, Pre-Symbolic forces. Undoubtedly, the witch is a liminal figure, in her positioning between worlds, between the human and nonhuman and within power structures.

Janiak’s film also presents Bea as a liminal figure, and is particularly interested in examining how her encounter and subsequent transformation (re)configures her body as a site through which a power struggle plays out. It is interesting that the “encounter” that leads to the implantation of the unexplained entity comes soon after Paul’s quip about “resting” her womb. If Bea here expresses anxiety about marital sex leading to conception, and with it what she perceives as a

¹⁵ In the *Malleus Malifcarium*, Thomas of Brabant “Book of Bees” tells the story of a young woman who is visited in the night by an incubus demon against her will. Not willing/able to take the body of Christ in Church, she confesses to a nun who agrees to take on her punishments: the incubus visits the nun instead that night, but she is so troubled by the demon’s visit and its corruptive ways that she hands back the young girl’s punishments. It is stated that this is the young girl’s fault – she is accused of having impure thoughts to attract the demon (415-416). It is also claimed that when women pretty themselves, in particular their hair, they draw on foul demons.

loss of control over her body, the film ultimately seems to suggest that she cannot escape her “destiny” as an incubator. Though Janiak doesn’t supply a clear explanation of what has happened to her, Bea’s subsequent actions and her confession to Paul that “they’re with me and I know what they know, and I know what they want, and I know what I’m supposed to do, I wanted to tell you but I’m not allowed” underlines her growing disempowerment and continues the theme of confinement, loss of identity that has been there from the start.¹⁶

As noted, even the early shot of tin cans roped to the car—cans that become entangled, knotted up and eventually unravel over the course of the car journey—symbolically suggests the “ties that bind” within marriage. The couple’s sexual play, which includes mild bondage, also serves to foreshadow some of the later scenes in which body horror takes centre stage. In the lead up to the film’s “birthing scene” (a scene that has a special significance in body horrors), a desperate Paul ties his wife to a bed to prevent her from harming herself. His restricting of her hands and legs places Bea in a powerless, submissive position that has uncomfortable connotations of rape and brings to mind other films from the genre, most especially *The Exorcist* (1973) in which the body of an adolescent girl, Regan (Linda Blair), becomes the site of a struggle between the forces of rationality and patriarchy and the primitive and demonic. Ropes in *Honeymoon* serve as restraints, then, underlying the broader exploration of Bea’s ambivalence concerning her marriage and the new roles

¹⁶ The *Malleus Maleficarum* is presented as a guide to identifying women as witches, giving witch hunters the information needed to bring them to trial and execute them. It is, as Creed notes, a book that is “permeated by an extreme hatred of women and fear of imaginary powers of castration”(Creed *Monstrous Feminine* 75).

expected of her, but Janiak also uses them to develop the focus on the body as a maternal site. Bea responds with terror and repulsion to the changes that she is experiencing, following her "impregnation". Desperate to void herself of the entity, she tries to "rape" herself by using a poker to stab her vagina in the hope it will "hit" her womb and dislodge her "foetus". An extreme action in the aftermath of an extreme violation, disturbingly it again recalls the earlier scene in which Paul had joked that they should take a break from sex so her "womb" could take a rest from the intrusions of his penis. As with other body horrors such as *The Brood*, *Demon Seed* (1977) and *Rosemary's Baby*, Janiak's film elaborates on the ambivalent response that Bea has to her body as a potential site of maternity; of course when she finally goes into "labour" and "gives birth" her fears are fully realised. The traumatic birth scene is especially replete with symbolism. As the "money shot" of this body horror it calls for the use of the kind of graphic special effects so beloved by horror fans, but Janiak ensures they are also an effective visualisation of the body as abject site (and sight). As a bound Bea is shown writhing in pain, her husband takes on the role of unwilling surgeon, inserting his hand into bloodied vagina and removes a long creature that resembles an umbilical cord.



Fig 2.3 *Honeymoon* (75min 51sec) Bea's birthing of a rope-like creature.

It is a creature of form yet formless; apparently sexless yet phallic; of the human body but bearing tentacles. It immediately calls to mind the parasitical creatures of Cronenberg's *Shivers* or the creatures of "rage" of *The Brood*, as well as the human head fused with the "thing" in Carpenter's film of the same title. It has previously been noted that Kristevan theories of abjection centre around the concept of borders and their dissolution. She suggests, too, that that which reminds us of the permeable nature of borders and leakages, whether it be menses, vomit or blood, has the potential to be profoundly unsettling and threatening to the rational self and to established (socially-constructed) identity (Kristeva 3). Confronted by the sight of what her body has incubated, at how she has been reduced to a "monstrous womb" (Creed *Monstrous Feminine* 43), Bea is seized with disgust and pummels her "offspring" to death.¹⁷

¹⁷ The disgust evinced by Paul ultimately leads to his own destruction: so overwhelmed is he that he leaves the room and this allows Bea to break free from her constraints and overpower him.

In *Rosemary's Baby* Rosemary is depicted as the innocent victim of a coven of satanic witches (and her husband's ambition) but in the end accepts her fate as nursemaid to the son of Satan. In *Honeymoon* Janiak seems to offer Bea a rather different future. Though the film has played with the conventions of both the witchcraft and possession narrative, its ending coalesces fully with classic body horror narratives in which a once-resisting "host" finally completes a corporeal mutation, to be reborn as a new creature (in *The Fly* it's "Brundlefly"). What is perhaps different here from most earlier examples (with the exception of *Shivers*) is that Janiak refuses the kind of (ambiguous) containment, through death or disintegration, of "the new flesh" (Cronenberg) and mutated entities of *The Fly*; or *The Brood*; or *American Werewolf in London*. Instead, having freed herself from her marriage and from her body as incubator, and having destroyed the cord-like creature, Bea moves to eliminate the final symbol of her "wedding" to the human. The method she uses to dispatch Paul—forcing him on to a boat and, having weighted him down with rocks, tossing him into the water—has pointedly symbolic resonances given that submerging the body in water was a test used by witch-hunters to determine whether a woman was indeed a witch. For the newly transformed Bea, however, her killing of Paul is an apparently benevolent gesture: she feels sure that the water will be his sanctuary and that she is "saving" him from "them". The final scene, which sees her fully transformed into her new nonhuman identity, shows her emerging from the water and walking blindly into the woods to join Annie and a cohort of similar beings. By embracing her new (perhaps truer) identity of a witch/froglake-mutant she perhaps externally manifests her inner desire

to be freed from socially constructed roles; certainly her “rebirth” fulfils an alignment with Nature that can be traced back to childhood.



Fig 2.4 *Honeymoon* (83min 17sec) Bea’s transformation is complete.

By employing body horror conventions, Janiak positions the character in the narrative in such a way that her monstrous femininity gives her the power to subvert her patriarchal definition and to do so without ultimate elimination or destruction (in contrast, for instance, to Nola in Cronenberg’s *The Brood*). In this way, Janiak offers a character more nuanced and enigmatic than those that populate classic body horrors and through her facilitates the exploration of age-old and universal anxieties about the nature of identity, the body, and the permeability of borders. In doing so, she posits new ways of viewing the “monstrous” and the issue of female agency.

Chapter 3: *Trouble Every Day*

The previous chapter examined how Janiak's *Honeymoon* utilises themes of the body, identity and gender in its examination of a "monstrous" yet subversive female central character. This chapter focuses on the film *Trouble Every Day* (2001), directed by Claire Denis, which also employs themes and conventions of body horror to depict both female and male "monsters". As in *Honeymoon*, Denis' film features a newlywed couple that visits Paris for their honeymoon: June (Tricia Vessey), who is an innocent and beautiful bride, and her husband Shane (Vincent Gallo), who has a virus that causes him to seek out and engage in acts of cannibalistic sex. When *Trouble Every Day* was released many critics expressed surprise that this director of rather avant-garde, sometimes abstract films should turn to a variation on the vampire/body horror story. Denis' previous films have been concerned with life and relationships in colonial and post-colonial West Africa and France, and have employed an experimental approach to genre and to such themes as sibling drama (*Nénette et Boni* (1996)); friendships and racial differences (*Chocolat* (2000)); and homoerotic romance (*Beau Travail* (1999)). *Trouble Every Day* may seem very different from her previous work, but I will argue that it continues many of her dominant themes and representations and contributes to a "new wave" of body horror.

In her 2001 film, *Trouble Every Day* Claire Denis also uses a honeymoon narrative as the backdrop against which a disturbing tale of infection, agency and body horror plays out. When it was released, Denis' film received some mixed reviews: hailed as "a superbly refined sample of cinematic art" (Met) it was simultaneously dismissed as an example of pretentious "necrophilic romanticism" (French). Some commentators expressed puzzlement that a director, long associated with enigmatic, poetic films, should direct her attention to visceral horror. McMahon considers whether the audience, who booed and walked out during its premiere at Cannes Film Festival, "saw this venture into the realm of horror and gore as an unwelcome departure from Denis's usually restrained approach to filmmaking" (77). However, that overlooks how much Denis' work has been committed to exploring themes of corporeality, sexuality, and the borders between the human and nonhuman, all central concerns of the horror genre. And like horror, Denis' is a cinema of the senses, in which the aural, the visual and the tactile are dynamically fused. Key studies of her work have noted her adoption of techniques that facilitate the construction of "an inner-directed sensual world, a world of immersive sensation" (Nayman and Tracy 216), what Laura U. Marks characterises as a "multisensory experience" (131). Denis' cinema, as McMahon (2014), Beugnet (2007) and Mayne (2005) have explored, is one in which the body takes centre stage and one that forms the viewer as an active participant in "the production of the cinematic experience" (Sobchack, qtd Marks 149). In *Beau Travail* Denis brings to life a tale of homoerotic desire through her sensual presentation of bodies, in stasis and motion, set against a Djibouti landscape that seems to exude an overpowering life force; in *Chocolat* colonial Cameroon provides the backdrop for a story of interracial

relations and social constraints in which sexual desire is signalled, not simply by characters' interactions, but by the visual and aural vibrancy of the environment. Denis' tale of modern day vampire/cannibals continues this fascination with conjuring up a realm of the senses, both for her characters and for the audience. Like Janiak's *Honeymoon, Trouble Every Day* follows the story of a newlywed couple struggling to adjust to the expectations and frustrations of their changed status. American Dr Shane Brown travels to Paris on honeymoon with his wife June, but it soon becomes clear that sexual contact with his new bride is not uppermost in his mind. Instead, he spends his time searching for ex colleague Léo (Alex Descas) whom he hopes can offer him a potential cure for the viral infection with which he is afflicted. Denis also introduces a second narrative strand concerning the effect that the infection has on Léo's wife Coré (Béatrice Dalle), who lures random men into remote fields with the promise of sex but rewards them by ripping them to pieces and wallowing in their blood.

With its focus on the body, as both a site of creation and of destruction, it is a film that is relatively easy to situate within the kind of "corporeal cinema"¹⁸ with which Denis has long been associated and which has natural (though not exclusive) links with horror. Both are cinemas of visceral imagery, jarring soundtracks and "body-based" performances. Denis' decision to cast Béatrice Dalle as the female lead seems especially inspired, referencing as it does that actress' association with

¹⁸ Martine Beugnet draws on the writings of Deleuze, Merleau-Ponty and Laura U. Marks among others to present an account of contemporary French films—of which, both *Trouble Every Day* and *Dans Ma Peau* are included—that exemplify filmmaking practices designed to engage the senses of the spectator. Beugnet demonstrate how technique such as visual and audio motifs in cinema can create "syneesthetic" effects that provoke forms of sociocultural thought in visceral and intellectual ways.

matters corporeal and sexual. Dalle's breakout role, in Jean-Jacques Beineix's *Betty Blue* (1986), was as an unstable, sexually voracious woman whose desires lead to her (self)destruction; off screen, the actress has long cultivated a persona that has been defined by an apparent volatility and a refusal to respect the "boundaries" of taste. Typical is an interview she gave to Marc-Olivier Fogiel in which, with disarming candour and black humour, she revealed that she had once broken into a morgue (having consumed LSD) and violated a corpse: "Oh la la," she said, "it's no big deal, in any case the guy didn't complain, he didn't even know that I had eaten his ears" (Dalle). As I will examine, her performance as Coré pushes the boundaries of assumed gender definitions and behaviour and creates a liminal character that is between the human and the nonhuman, the natural and the artificial. Vincent Gallo, in the role of Shane, also brings a certain edgy quality, shaped by performances on screen (*Buffalo '66*) and off, as well as a transnational identity (he has appeared, both in Hollywood mainstream films and art-house and independent productions from a number of countries, including Canada; France; Japan; Poland; Hungary; Norway; Spain and Italy, and he has not limited his roles to English-speaking ones) that perhaps reminds audiences of earlier actors associated with "extreme" performances in "corporeal cinema" (Marlon Brando, playing a sexual experimenter in Bertolucci's *Last Tango in Paris* comes to mind). Gallo's transnational identity, too, seems especially apt, for this story of a virus that respects no borders.

In an observation that might be applied more generally to the ever-evolving horror genre, Jean-Marc Lalanne has observed that "something profoundly amphibious characterises Denis' cinema. It is made from the point of view of women

as well as men, from the point of view of the predators as well as from that of the prey [...]. It crosses genre (gore, horror, fantasy), genders (man/woman, animal/human) and does not settle anywhere" (Lalanne 24 as cited by Beugnet 41). *Trouble Every Day* features a narrative that is fragmented and at times obscure; peculiar, somewhat cipher-like characters; and a core concern with investigating accepted definitions of gender and identity. Its narrative complexity is mirrored in a rich aesthetic that ensures even the most mundane shots are loaded with significance, and accompanied by a soundtrack that exudes movement and life. In this film all about borders and the ease with which they may be subverted or blurred, it is fitting that Denis chooses to draw from a range of genre in the framing of her narrative. *Trouble Every Day* contains elements drawn from marital drama and the thriller, as well the "corporeal cinema" that Denis has played such a key role in shaping, and the "cinema of extremity" that has recently emerged, particularly in France (West). However, limiting the analysis to the parameters of this thesis, I wish to examine how Denis draws from the aesthetics and conventions of horror generally, and body horror specifically, to offer an original and disturbing commentary on our relationship to our bodies, each other, and to our environment.

As with Janiak's *Honeymoon* and the Soskas' *American Mary*, *Trouble Every Day* contains a plethora of visual motifs familiar from what is a diverse genre. The Gothic tradition is acknowledged with shots of Notre Dame; gargoyles; castles; a lofty tower; secret laboratories; labyrinthine passages and underground chambers, and Denis includes some familiar "stock" characters such as the mad scientist; the damsel in distress; and the predatory female. More specifically, she takes from

specific subgenres of horror, notably the vampire tale and body horror. The theme of science-gone-mad is, of course, a staple of the genre more generally but carries particular resonance within body horror, while the centring of the plot around a man-made virus that causes rampant sexual urges and violence inevitably recalls Cronenberg's *Rabid* and *Shivers*. It has been noted by both Beard ("The Visceral Mind" 24) and Wood (*Hollywood from Vietnam to Reagan...and Beyond* 70-71), that scientific/medical narratives lend themselves to the construction of very particular representations of landscapes: theirs is a world of sterile harshly-lit buildings and sanitary spaces. Beard points to a *mise en scène* that serves to enclose "the human animal in an envelope of clean lines and attractive proportions, smoothing over unsightly nature and denying the unacceptable warts and messy instincts of the body" (Beard, "The Visceral Mind" 24). The explosion of the messy body and its uncontainable mutations and uncontrollable urges, then, becomes all the more startling. The lush and exotic palette Denis uses from the Gothic tradition is contrasted with the contemporary façade of blandness familiar from classic body horror environments and indeed from such influential early examples as Franju's *Eyes without a Face* (1959). It is a world in which the most non-descript suburban setting conceals underground laboratories and sinister Gothic towers, and in which a sterile hotel corridor or a fluorescent-lit medical lab becomes the backdrop to extreme scenes of rape, blood-letting and cannibalism.

Denis presents the suburbs as still and stagnant, in contrast to the city of Paris, which is so vibrant that its life pulse may be seen and heard in the film's soundtrack. The characters that negotiate the film's environment are just passing

through it like so many others going about their day-to-day life, and as the exterior landscapes, rooms and inanimate objects are given preferential treatment, the audiences' senses are lulled into a false sense of security until, at pivotal moments, the film forces us to witness the body as it explored, examined, opened up and spilled onto the screen, where it engulfs and inflames the viewer's senses. Clearly, *Trouble Every Day* constructs a world in which the contrast between the banal and the extraordinary, between the clean and the messy, between science and the body, is foregrounded. However, Denis approaches the working through of such binaries in a subversive, ambiguous way and, in doing so, offers a commentary on states of abjection, as well as on the dynamics of spectatorial engagement. Though her two central characters, Shane and Coré, share the same viral infection—they are both driven by an incredible urge to copulate with and devour human flesh—each occupies a different environment, and Denis uses specific techniques to delineate them.

Recalling Janiak's association of Bea with the nonhuman world in *Honeymoon*, Denis presents Coré's world as a dark, "primitive" place, of murky landscapes and omnipresent (if muffled) sound. The blurring of optical clarity and the complexity of the soundtrack here reiterates the director's concern with borders and their dissolution, while also bearing out what Beugnet has explored is her interest in haptic visuality and hearing (98). This alignment of the female character with the natural world is introduced in our first glimpse of Coré; a lingering shot of a bleak field of long grass reveals her waiting, like a lioness hunting on the African plains (and she is indeed a predator, having lured a lorry driver to his death). In later

scenes she is shown imprisoned, shrouded in shadows, peering out like a contained beast in a cage, locked up for her own and others' protection. The association of Coré with a primitive animality continues in a series of intimately dark and warm close-ups in which she is shown being cleaned and groomed by her husband/caretaker (or, perhaps, her master). As with Bea, her estrangement from her husband and the process of her own transformation are conveyed by a shifting attitude to language: if *Honeymoon's* Bea gradually loses her vocal dexterity as she transforms, Coré, already infected and "changed", is presented as essentially non-verbal for the duration of the film. This privileging of the non-verbal is perhaps deliberately provocative, aligning the female with the body, emotions, impulses rather than speech, intention etc. As such, parallels can be suggested between her representation and other characters explored in this thesis: when Mary loses her grip on her controlled nature and attacks a security guard in *American Mary* her vocals are reduced to primal grunts and breathing; Bea's transformation in *Honeymoon* has already been cited; in the following chapter the character of Esther in Marina de Van's *Dans ma Peau* will be examined in relation to speech and sound.

In contrast to Coré's sensual environment, the world of Shane (or rather, Dr Brown) is presented in rather different terms. Boss has noted that in early body horrors clinical environments are often used as a backdrop against which graphic scenes of the bloody brutality of violence enacted upon the fragile and squishy bodies take place ("Vile Bodies and Bad Medicine" 15). In *Trouble Every Day* Shane moves through busy city environments, medical laboratories and anonymous hotel

rooms. The clinical world of his work is presented through extreme close-ups of laboratory equipment and men and women in white jackets who slice and dice perfectly preserved and cleaned human brains. Denis also suggests a mirroring of the professional with the personal: the hotel in which he and June are honeymooning is presented, not as a locus of intimacy, but as an impersonal space that is dominated by harsh lighting and blank whiteness. Similar to other Denis films, colour plays an important role in conveying a sense of power relations: the sexually innocent and neglected June is dressed mainly in white, and the starkness of their hotel room (plain white bed linen; white shower curtains) reflects their emotional estrangement. As with many body horrors, including Cronenberg's *Shivers* (in which a clean modern apartment block becomes drenched in blood and stomach entrails), Carpenter's *The Thing* (in which a scientific research facility is splattered with mutating body parts) and Scott's *Alien* (in which the sterile high-tech spaceship is invaded by a seeping, leaking, exploding alien), *Trouble Every Day* exhibits a gendered fascination with "polluting" man-made, sterile landscapes with explosions of the abject. In her study of the film, Beugnet points out "the stereotypical opposition between the neon-lit, ordered cleanliness of these controlled, specialized environments and the sense of dreadful sensuality induced by the confusion and excessive violence of the horror scenes is heightened to the extreme" (Beugnet 44). Denis' employment of specific techniques, centred on sound and image, to depict these explosions/eruptions/pollutions helps her delineate her key themes of the essential fluidity of identity and the base corporeality of humans, but they can also be identified as one of her more significant contributions to the "new wave" of body horror.

In her book *Carnal Thoughts* Vivian Sobchack argues “we do not experience any movie only through our eyes. We see and comprehend and feel films with our entire bodily being, informed by the full history and carnal knowledge of our acculturated sensorium” (63). Laura U. Mark’s *Skin of the Film* describes how “synaesthesia, as well as haptic visuality, enables the viewer to experience cinema as multi-sensory” (22-23), to present the concept of a “haptic gaze”, one that alludes to a sense of touch, where the image and its corresponding soundtrack creates a tactile response in its viewer. Expanding on this, Beugnet notes that “the effect of looking and listening takes on a mimetic quality indicative of an involvement with the object of the gaze that pre-empts or supersedes this state of detached self-awareness” (5). Through her employment of haptic techniques, Denis offers a participatory and sensory exploration of dangerously pleasurable, yet horrific sexual experiences and invites the spectator to immerse themselves in this corporeal world. Long takes; dim lighting; muted vocal soundtrack; long and interrupted underlying noises and hums; narrative gaps where the story pauses on mundane activities; banal environments of everyday life; a prioritising of objects (rather than subjects) in the frame: all are used by Denis to align the viewer with familiar tactile engagements while also serving to mute the senses, as it were.

As with Coré, Shane’s relation to the aural is so ambivalent and compromised that the viewer encounters an “undifferentiated” soundtrack, one that requires “we make the choice of which sounds are most important to attend to response” (Marks 183). This opens up a more interactive, dialogic relationship between the viewer and

the viewed, and in its stripping away of the authority of the voice (in several scenes his voice is muffled or overpowered by the insistent hum of the omnipresent soundscapes of traffic, air-conditioning and lab equipment) it recalls the Soskas' *American Mary*. Though the audio lacks clarity, there is no doubt that it works with the visual to overwhelm the spectator's senses. Denis presents us with shots of the body that are in extreme close-ups and drenched with vibrant colour; scenes of sensual engagement lay bare the corporeality of the human animal—breathing, groaning and moaning. Denis is especially interested in teasing out the relationship between a sensual “overwhelming” or engulfment, a predatory sexual aggression and an abject body. In what is the most extreme expression of the fusion of bodies in sexual intercourse, the encounters that both Shane and Coré initiate end in a “devouring”, not just of the senses but also of the flesh. Denis presents these encounters as intense and graphic, drawing perhaps from a wider context of the new “extreme cinema” that has emerged in France in the past two decades. Both scenes present what appears, initially, to be a consensual sexual encounter, but both soon undermine that equal power balance, and descend into chaotic scenes of rape and cannibalism. In doing so, Denis takes what has been a fundamental element of body horror—the ambivalence with which the genre treats boundaries between monster/victim—and pushes it to the extreme.

It has already been noted that Denis' male and female monsters are conceived as creatures of gross appetite and extremity, ones that facilitate the director's exploration of taboo subjects such as cannibalism, strangulation, death and necrophilia (all familiar from the body horror). While body horror has always

revelled in the sight of the body—torn open, pulsating, dripping, leaking—Denis' significant contribution to the subgenre is to bring to the fore the sensuality of bodies reconfigured and engulfed. Like Bea in *Honeymoon*, Coré is represented as an erratic and sensual human animal, driven by her desire. However, she is not the only character defined by primal instincts: in one key scene, a young man (Nicolas Duvauchelle) breaks into the house and approaches the room where she is being held captive, trapped behind a broken door barricaded with wooden planks. The soundtrack is stripped of all its mundanity, the hum of traffic and wind ceases, and we focus instead on Coré's seductive stare as she peers through the gaps of the door. As if hypnotised, the young man reaches through the gaps and the two begin to kiss and caress each other's bodies. As their lust intensifies, and Coré slowly lifts her skirt to reveal her naked body, the soundtrack becomes intense and we hear the sound of their moist lips touching. Energised by an insatiable lust and casting aside caution, the young man rips down the planks of wood and enters the room. The scenes cut to an extreme close-up of almost touchable skin, as the camera slowly and intimately explores its textures, revealing the minute pores and hairs, the shadows, contours and colours that resemble a landscape and that recall the establishing scenes of a Coré as primitive predator. A female hand cuts across this canvas of flesh, and it becomes clear that the perspective is Coré's. The "enveloping" nature of the scene is underlined by Denis' introduction here of sensual music (by Tendersticks), which is layered with the diegetic sounds of intensified breathing. The result is an unbearably sensual atmosphere that invites the spectator to become fully immersed, to capitulate to the intensity of the scene. It has been established that in body horror the notion of spectatorial identification is often problematised as

the viewer is forced to confront extreme sights or behaviours. Here, Denis places the spectator in a dangerous position as we witness a violent and horrifying turn in the couple's lovemaking. Core's playful bites, at first intensely pleasurable for the young man, gradually give way to gnawing and her lover's requests to stop go unheeded. His resistance has the effect of provoking and exciting her more and she proceeds to devour his face—depicted through extreme close-ups of her mouth suckling and licking mass amounts of blood. The man's howls of pain are soon replaced with his last gasps for breath while her animalistic grunts and moans eerily mingle with occasional playful laughter as she sticks her finger and her tongue into a fleshy bite wound on his shoulder. As the scene draws to a close, Denis presents a wide shot of Coré, covered in blood and in a haze of ecstasy, slowing walking away from the body and touching a white wall in the room. As the shot of the wall fills the frame, it is revealed to be splattered with blood and stains, mirroring the explosion of violence and the corporeal that has just drenched our cinema screen.

Denis' deft ability to construct scenes such as this—ones paradoxically beautiful and dreadful—ensures a continuance of body horror's blurring of the lines between horror and pleasure, while the leakage of blood presents a symbolic reference to the subversion of social order and the breakdown of structure that is so fundamental to the subgenre. In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva notes that blood is “a vital element” but that in Western culture has become a symbol that “refers to women, fertility, and the assurance of fecundation. It thus becomes a fascinating semantic crossroads, the propitious place for abjection where death and femininity, murder and procreation, cessation of life and vitality all come together” (96). Denis'

generous depictions of blood, both corporeal (oozing from the body) and abstract (the beautiful patterns on the wall), suggests her fascination with the body “turned inside out” and the blurring of lines between life and death forces. The seduction-devouring scene also brings to mind Kristeva’s theories of the archaic mother, the terrifying yet intoxicating “primitive” female (it is appropriate that the object of Coré’s lust is a barely-adult male). The sex drive and the death drive here are non-too-subtly linked, as the engulfment in sexual climax (the “little death”) is rapidly replaced by a capitulation to actual death. As a vampire/cannibal Coré is of course a figure of the liminal, existing between life and death, science and Nature (even her name is a variation of Kore, the Greek version of Persephone, the Queen of the Underworld). In the seduction scene Denis also introduces her as the instigator of bodily transformation for the young man, who, overwhelmed by his senses, experiences the cessation of them as he is devoured, reconfigured, killed.

Coré is undoubtedly a monstrous force, but she is also a dangerously attractive one, and like many horror films Denis collapses the divisions between monster and victim when she reveals that her infection stems from her own husband’s experiments. Though Coré may appear to revel in the transformation that has made her a creature of the (predatory) senses, like most body horror victims/monsters she is accorded a degree of pathos and self-knowledge. Soon after the seduction/devouring scene, she returns to her husband’s laboratory and begins to pour petrol over it. Determined to rid the world of her husband’s dangerous experiments, she takes what is an altruistic yet self-destructive action that reveals her own moral repugnance at what she has become. However, before she can

complete her perversely empowering act, her double/nemesis Shane visits the house and strangles her to death. The elimination of Coré through an act of male aggression is in line with much of body horror (including *American Mary*), which often moves towards an uneasy closing off the threat posed by the “monstrous” female and an ambiguous restoration of patriarchal order. However, it is important to note that it is achieved only after scenes that reveal both Coré’s sensual appeal and her own awareness of her monstrosity.

In contrast to Coré, Shane is presented as a chameleon-like character whose monstrosity is masked by a superficial sociopathic charm and who is quite capable of moving between the worlds of life and death, between respectability and debauchery. Denis’ representation of him is profoundly ambivalent, invoking once again the debates concerning spectatorial identification that have been raised by the analysis of both rape-revenge and body horror narratives in this thesis. Like Coré’s, Shane’s cannibalistic sexual encounter also starts off as consensual but soon descends into a horrific scene of violence and disempowerment for his female victim. Yet in contrast to the sensual presentation of Coré’s seducing and devouring of the young man, Denis’ depiction of Shane’s encounter is stark, uncompromising, repulsive. The scene opens as a secondary character, Cristelle (Florence Loiret-Caille), a chambermaid at the hotel, navigates the labyrinthine corridors of the hotel, stealing the various miniature servings of jam and bars of soap. These acts of (minor) transgression catch the predatory eye of Shane, who follows her as she descends into the service quarters of the hotel. In a mirroring of the scene of Mary’s “descent” into the basement of the strip club in *American Mary*, as Cristelle navigates the

corridors of the “bowels” of the hotel we are presented with a subterranean and utilitarian world brimming with cleaning products, folded laundry, and staff lockers and shower rooms. However, if in *American Mary* the visit to the “underworld” initiates Mary into a new world of body modification and with it facilitates a journey of self-discovery and empowerment (albeit temporary), for Cristelle what starts as an exciting encounter, a diverting intrusion of the sensual into the workplace, soon becomes fatal. Denis has previously invoked Classical mythology in her naming of her “heroine” Coré and she furthers the allegorical connections here as Cristelle, like Persephone/Kore in Classical mythology, descends into an Underworld where order is replaced by chaos, desire becomes linked with death, and where an attractive stranger becomes her destroyer.

Already presented as an aggressive yet calm (in contrast to the always-unrestrained Coré), in this scene Shane demonstrates control and patience in his “seduction” of Cristelle. Yet the viewer is left in no doubt that he is a predator, more calculating and ruthless than his female counterpart. As Cristelle undresses by her locker, vulnerable in her nakedness, he sneaks up behind her and the camera adopts his point of view as he examines the back of her neck and shoulder, assessing them as both a site of the erotic and of the “consumable”. Though initially startled, Cristelle seems interested and is apparently comfortable with taking a submissive role, capitulating to him as he restrains her wrists and overpowers her with a ravenous lust. The camera moves back, to better capture the passionate embraces and perhaps also to facilitate the viewer’s voyeurism. However, in contrast to the layered, sensuous atmosphere created in Coré’s seduction scene, here the action

takes place against a cold, clinic setting dominated by the hulking industrial plumbing that runs along the walls, and the hard, metallic lockers that hem the couple in. The soundtrack, too, is rather more industrial than the corporeal world of Coré: instead of lips softly touching, we have the harsh clank of metal as bodies fall against the lockers. As the couple drops to the floor, Denis' camera remains in a high position looking down, floating above them as it were, and capturing Shane's overwhelming dominance over Cristelle's slight body. The pleasurable qualities of Coré's scene are absent here: there are no extreme close-ups of skin or of sensual touch. Instead, it seems that pleasure is quickly overtaken by pain, as Cristelle begins to struggle, rejecting Shane's dominance. Through her presentation of the male body (and the slight female one), Denis depicts the ultimate engulfment: a brutal rape, a "devouring" of the passive female body by the male predator. As the previous chapter has explored, questions of how rape and sexual violence should be presented on screen are fundamental to analyses of the rape-revenge subgenre and are of particular interest to female directors working within the horror genre.

However, if the Soskas and Janiak choose to limit the exposure to the depiction of violence towards women—panning away or presenting the victim's point of view—Denis offers what is perhaps a more controversial, confrontational portrayal. The rape of Cristelle is shown to be a violation and assault for her (sexually; mentally, bodily) but also for the viewer. In her study of cinema and embodiment, Vivian Sobchack suggests that filmmakers like Denis encourage greater dialogue between viewer and image, "an exchange between two bodies" (quoted in Marks 149) and while this may have its rewards, such as a delight in revelling in the senses, here is it a "dialogue" that brings with it spectatorial discomfort and horror in the face of the

exposition of the visceral nature of a rape and an engulfment. Pinning Cristelle to the floor Shane moves down her body and bites into her vagina. Faced with such extreme content, the viewer may turn away or, conversely, contemplate the unflinching close-up of Shane's mouth and jaw covered in blood as he devours and relishes his victim's blood. Denis keeps moving the camera closer and closer, and soon the image itself becomes blurred, obscure. The scene draws to a close and the frame becomes predominately black with only the sounds of Shane's climactic grunts occupying our senses. An abrupt visual and audio cut presents a wide shot of Cristelle, covered in blood, dead.

Unlike Coré, who seems unable to move beyond the corporeal/ sensual into the "rational" (she leave her victims' bodies to be discovered), Shane is shown to be cool and calculating, able to switch off his ravenous desires as quickly as he turned them on: he removes the body, washes away the blood, and hides the stained towels. He then returns to his white hotel room and washes the blood from his body but in the process spoils the pristine surroundings. By the time his wife returns to the hotel room, however, Shane has managed to erase all traces of his carnal experience, save for a single drop of blood that remains on the shower curtain. Recalling the shower scene in *Psycho*, here the drop of blood assumes a kind of fetish-like significance, reminding him (and us) of his loss of control, his immersion in, and capitulation to, the abject. The presence of a drop of blood also reminds us of the base corporeal essence we all embody yet often deny; it is the "present absence" that haunts us. Of course, the leaking of blood onto the white surface of the otherwise pristine bathroom here recalls the earlier scene where the blood is

smear on the white walls by Coré, but while she revels in its smeary, sensual viscous qualities, Shane sees it only as an uncanny and unwanted souvenir of his immersion in the abject, one that must be removed if order (and control) is to be restored. Furthering the Hitchcock connection, Denis offers a medium shot of June talking to her husband, the spot of blood directly above her. The shot is blackly humorous in its toying with the audience (who wondered if June will discover it and confront her husband's transgressions), but it also has a more disturbing quality: it, perhaps, marks her out as his next victim.

As a figure of the Establishment (he is a doctor), Shane is able to straddle two worlds: of clean and rational scientific practice and of the wild, bloodied and irrational world of horror and cannibalism. Significantly, though his transgressions are as extreme as Coré's, he is not eliminated and it is assumed he will continue to move through the world, a bearer of a plague that brings chaos and death. Shane's "triumph" then continues the kind of apocalyptic endings seen in earlier body horrors, such as *Shivers* and *The Thing*, while Denis' innovative approach to aesthetic and aural style marks out *Trouble Every Day* as an important entry into the "second wave" of body horror. In the final chapter I will examine Marina de Van's *Dans ma Peau*, perhaps the most extreme body horror, and a challenging meditation on matters of identity, the corporeal and narcissistic engulfment.

Chapter 4: *Dans Ma Peau*

Chapter 1, 2 and 3 featured analyses of horror films directed by women that borrow from, and complicate, the conventions and metaphoric potential of the genre and its particular reflections on themes of the body, identity, intimacy and representation. This chapter will examine Marina de Van's 2002 *Dans Ma Peau*, a film that centres around a female protagonist, Esther (played by the director), who neglects her career and love life to pursue a compulsive and cannibalistic relationship with her own body. The analysis will consider the conventions and techniques employed by de Van, and explore how she draws from the body horror subgenre to depict an abject character whose extreme actions may be seen as a grotesque reflection of the dominant anxieties concerning women's relationships to their bodies. Particular attention will be paid to examining de Van's portrayal of the clash that exists between the protagonist's corporate and corporeal personas, as well as the specific aesthetic and performance techniques that are utilised to delineate the themes.

Initially a student of philosophy, de Van turned her attention to film and enrolled at La Fémis, considered by many to be the "élite" of film schools in France and associated with a new breed of "filmmakers who are unfazed by the prospect of cinematic risk-taking" (Palmer "Style and Sensation" 173). During her time there she made two short films: *Retention* (1997), about a woman who retains her excrement

by eating it, and *Bien Sous Tous Rapports* (1996) a provocative story of a young girl being taught, by her parents, the technique of giving fellatio. In both cases, de Van was interested in producing films that were visceral, taboo-breaking, shocking to the viewer. Her student work inevitably attracted attention, and her films' intense focus on the body ensured that they would be placed within a larger context of a "corporeal cinema". In his study *The Cinematic Body*, Steven Shavero proposes commonalities that might link together diverse films under the umbrella of "corporeal cinema". For Shavero, these are marked by a revelling in "the delirious excesses of postmodern vision, the excitement and passivity of spectatorship, the frenzy and fragility of images, the desires that inform social constructions of subjectivity, the pornographic allure of violence and sexuality, and the politics of the subjugated body" (8). *Dans Ma Peau* appears to fit within such a category, in terms of the methods used by de Van as both a director and as an actress. Carrie Tarr has pointed to the continuities between de Van's career as an actress for other directors, most notably in François Ozon's *Regarde La Mer* (1997), in which she plays a hitchhiker that seduces, kills and mutilates her friendly landlord and steals her baby, and her directorial debut: both feature "roles which drive the body into extreme, transgressive situations ... In so doing, arguably, she is pushing cinema, and the representation of women, to the limit" (80). In contrast to the Soskas and to Janiak, de Van's desire to work with the genre stems less from budgetary constraints and the dominating influence of Hollywood and its horror hungry audiences, and more from her association with fellow filmmaker and mentor Ozon and other filmmakers of the "New French Extremity" (Quandt).

Dans Ma Peau tells the story of Esther who, while attending a late night work party with her friend and colleague Sandrine (Léa Drucker), cuts her leg in the garden without noticing the extent of her injury. Upon visiting her doctor (Adrian de Van) the following day, she explains that she cannot feel any pain but later that evening she begins to examine the wound in what becomes an increasingly obsessive manner. Confiding in her boyfriend Vincent (Laurent Lucas) about her new compulsion, she is met with sympathetic if perplexed concern. However, as Esther meets with challenges in work, her transgressive behaviour intensifies and de Van offers evermore visceral and graphic scenes of her indulgence in self-harm, bloodletting and self-cannibalism. By the film's end Esther's behaviour is so extreme, that she has become confined to a room, apparently cut off from human contact, with a future that is uncertain.

Given that it is such a provocative film, it is not surprising that *Dans Ma Peau* has already attracted a number of critical readings. As with all the films examined in this thesis, de Van's film crosses discrete categories, and "cannibalises" several genres/subgenres/styles. James Quandt links it to the wider movement of "New French Extremity", which he suggests can be regarded as offering "a narcissistic response to the collapse of ideology in a society traditionally defined by political polarity and theoretical certitude" (Quandt). Expanding on Quandt's reading, and noting her debt to the horror genre, Hainge is particularly interested in examining the graphic nature of de Van's depictions of blood and bodily transgression. He concludes that *Dans ma Peau* fits most comfortably in the "Cinema of the Extreme" with its interest in presenting "the paradoxes and contradictions inherent in the

gender politics of horror" (462). Tim Palmer suggests that *Dans Ma Peau* is best placed in the category he identifies as "cinéma du corps", or "films that deal frankly and graphically with the body, and corporeal transgressions" ("Style and Sensation" 57). Elaborating on the central conundrum posed by the striking genre fluidity of the film, Carrie Tarr lists the range of de Van's inspirations, from film genres (body horror; drama; suspense) to art movements that include "body art" and "performance art". For her, what makes *Dans ma Peau* so unusual is de Van's realistic and unflinching portrayal of her subject's intimate and narcissistic encounter with her own body (85).

The difficulties of even trying to fit de Van's debut into a category mirror the blurring of boundaries and definitions—of self; of identity; of sexuality; of gender—fundamental to both body horror and indeed to the cinema that has been identified as "New Extreme"/ "Cinema Du Corps" / "Cinema of the Extreme". As has been explored in this thesis, in the first wave of body horror graphic depictions of blood, mutations and corporeal transgressions served to illustrate the fragility of the human body and personal identity, as well as to shock viewers and showcase an array of special effects. de Van's film expands on this arena and constructs the body as a potential site of empowerment and creative self-expression, conveyed via effects that are visceral, certainly, but less spectacular. As I will argue, one of de Van's most important contributions to this new wave of body horror is her provocative challenge to the subgenre's tendency to create such startling and implausible special effects that the viewer may easily disavow them. In the place of the exploding heads of *Scanners* or the scurrying head-thing of *The Thing*, we are offered a queasy,

forensic presentation of the fragmented body that is, arguably, more disturbing and more difficult to deny. The fact that the “experiments” that are conducted on Esther’s body are self-inflicted also raises fascinating questions about the nature of female agency and its impact on spectatorial identification.

In her study of abjection, Julia Kristeva has argued that societies often adopt certain rituals, such as cleaning/grooming, and health and fitness regimes, in an effort to contain the borders of our bodies and maintain control over them (Kristeva 2). The defining of boundaries (of identity; of body; of behaviour) and their dissolution or undermining is, of course, fundamental to body horror. de Van’s film presents an extreme case of a female subject whose identity and self-image has been shaped by societal and cultural forces, but who intentionally and proactively alienates herself from constructed norms of behaviour. Esther’s reconfiguration of her self involves the breaking of cultural taboos and an altering of the body that is instigated by her alone and in that respect she differs from other subjects of body horror that have tended to be more “acted upon” than acting. Ironically, however, in her extreme focus on her self, on exploring her body and initiating its own grotesque transformation, Esther betrays her subconscious absorption of a wider culture in which the “taboo” of narcissism is increasingly endorsed. Conversely, de Van’s exploration of the roots of Esther’s malaise suggests that it is prompted by a profound sense of disassociation—from self and others—brought about by the pressures of living in that same modern commodity-driven corporate society. In the analysis that follows, I wish to examine how de Van presents the female body as a

site of profound disassociation and a facilitator of the expression of narcissism and, perhaps, of agency.

de Van has revealed that the inspiration for *Dans ma Peau* was her own experience of trauma and disassociation from her body that occurred as a result of being involved in a car accident as a child. In the film, however, Esther's compulsive behaviour is attributed to a range of factors that include societal pressures.¹⁹ As with the other directors studied in this thesis, de Van employs a very specific aesthetic palette and multi-layered approach to soundtrack to construct the complex web of influences and anxieties that impact Esther. As Palmer notes, "in its *mise-en-scène* *Dans ma peau* at least partly links Esther's plight to sterile social contexts and a critique of contemporary careerism" ("Under Your Skin" 177). de Van's interest in depicting the corporate world as a place of profound isolation and disassociation is introduced in the opening credit sequence, which offers a glimpse of Paris' financial district La Défense through a split-screen montage of buildings and interiors—looming corporate buildings, busy metro stations and roads during rush hour and interiors of large corporate halls and escalators—all set to Esbjorn Svensson's melodic piano track. Using the haptic techniques also employed by Denis in *Trouble Every Day*, de Van presents here a visually complex montage, in which images appear, blur, and diverge, and perception becomes ambiguous, unreliable. This is replicated in the handling of the soundtrack: the growing sense of unease evoked by

¹⁹When she was eight de Van was involved in a car accident and sustained minor injuries. In the aftermath, and upon examining her wounds, she recalls being fascinated with the reaction that the sight of her bone protruding from the skin provoked: "I didn't faint and I didn't really feel pain. Instead, I saw my leg as if it wasn't part of my body, as if it was an object. For me, then, it was a fascinating deformed object" (de Van).

the unstable visual image “seeps” over into the sound, as melodic piano gives way to discordant scratching of strings. The final moments of the opening montage show a derelict office corridor, where shots of flaking paintwork anticipate later ones of the curls of skin that Esther peels from her body and preserves.

The use of such techniques poses questions about the interpretation of the image, and indeed it is the image that Esther has of her self—of her body; her personal identity; her corporate identity—that triggers the compulsion she develops to “consume” herself. In her analysis of the film Martine Beugnet argues that Esther’s is “a body shaped to become the valuable property and tool of a specific working environment” and is thus a “contested” site (159). Having presented us with a representation of the business world that is rather ambiguous, de Van suggests how inescapably embedded the corporeal and the intimate are within it. Certainly, shots of standard office supplies, such as paperclips, a steel ruler, a stapler, a set of scissors, help to establish a workplace setting but they also carry dual import: these banal instruments will soon become tools for Esther’s self-cutting. Later scenes develop this intertwining of the corporate/public world with the personal/corporeal one as Esther is shown retreating from the open-planned office environment in which she “carves out” her career, to a storage room in which she indulges her compulsions to “carve” her body.

It is, perhaps, a combination of factors that compels Esther to gradually withdraw into her self. At first, she is shown to be a highly motivated, obedient worker, one that puts her career in front of her love life. Her chosen profession,

aptly enough, is a marketing executive, participating in campaigns to brand and sell products that promise to enhance lifestyle and form self-image in the consumer world. Though she seems a willing participant in this “society of the spectacle” (see Debord and Knabb), the pressures and expectations that are exerted on her to succeed, to do anything to impress the client, soon lead to a profound estrangement that expresses itself in taboo-breaking behaviour. If de Van had already used very specific techniques to represent the corporate world as a place of uncertainty and dual meaning, she approaches the filming of Esther’s growing disassociation from it and her body in an innovative and thought-provoking manner. Esther is introduced to the viewer in a close-up shot, as she types on her computer in her home. She is interrupted by Vincent, who suggests that they might move in together, to which she responds that she wishes first to achieve greater financial stability (“I want to live in luxury”). His attempts at developing greater (emotional) intimacy and security having failed, he leaves to “go home and do some work”. de Van’s close-up fades to black, and a lingering shot of Esther’s back follows. As the camera slowly booms up, we are offered a sensual capturing of parts of her body: from the back of her right foot following the contours of her perfectly smooth leg (isolated via chiaroscuro lighting) to the middle of her torso, before the scene again fades to black. Influenced by Jean-Luc Godard’s *Une Femme Mariée* (1964), and incorporating some elliptical cuts and discordant sound, de Van paints the body here as fragmented, a “canvas” of distinct, discrete “parts”. The fragmented presentation here calls to mind what Mulvey has suggested is the dominant presentation of women’s bodies in classical cinema: as a series of “passive” body parts that are often fetishised (19). de Van’s Brechtian techniques—where we become acutely conscious of the mechanics of

production of the image—ensure that the viewer feels unsettled, but they also help her to delineate the essential “body horror” theme of the dual nature of the subject (body vs. mind) and give us an insight into the particular mind of a modern career woman who feels estranged from her body (Esther’s *disembodied* leg, and De Van’s framing and intercutting of it against a back drop of mechanical objects, city scapes and split screen, calls to mind the avant-garde films of Dudley Murphy/Fernand Léger’s *Ballet Mecanique* (1924) and of Erik Satie/René Clair’s *Entr’Acte* (1924)).

It is interesting that de Van the director isolates the leg as the body part that most fascinates her here and the one that will, in its compromised state, come to enthrall Esther. A part of the body that is essential to functionality, but that has been eroticised in visual culture (see the anonymous legs of the dancers in Busby Berkeley musicals and the specific stardom of Rita Hayworth, Betty Grable or Marlene Dietrich), Esther’s fetishised leg becomes a site of dual meaning for de Van, the female filmmaker reclaiming the gaze, and for de Van, as Esther. As Tarr notes of this early scene, the viewer is invited to view this shot of her pristine leg as a “clean and proper body”, the memory of which will take on significant meaning later on when we are confronted with its (self-inflicted) deterioration and mutilation as one part of a “blood-spattered, inhuman, abject body” (81). It is the injured leg, its meaty essence exposed through the ruptured skin, which becomes the entry point for Esther’s journey of deep corporeal discovery. In that respect her perverse journey recalls those of other body horror protagonists, confronted by the sight and the sensations of their morphing bodies (Esther’s obsessive “worrying” of her wound recalls Seth’s fascination with probing his mutating body as he transforms from ‘Martin Brundle’ to ‘Brundlefly’ in *The Fly*).

The links between intimacy and disassociation introduced in this early scene are expanded throughout *Dans Ma Peau*. Vincent's overtures, Esther's panicked reaction, and de Van's filming of a "body of parts" establish the connection between her character's sense of herself, her independence (which she appears to relate to work) and her body. Like Bea in *Honeymoon*, anxieties about intimacy and about a possible ceding of control cause Esther to withdraw from her partner and eventually become a kind of perverse lover (of herself). Unlike Bea, however, Esther's self-mutilation and her "exposure" of the abject nature of her body are *actions* rather than *reactions*, and in that regard link her with the transgressive characters of Ruby and Beatress in *American Mary*. All of them display a form of body dysmorphia, which is frequently connected to practices of cutting/mutilation. According a study published in the *British Medical Journal*, body dysmorphia often involves "deliberate self harm", is "far more common in females than ... in males (11.2% v 3.2%)" and is usually a reaction to specific factors, from familial tensions that might place the subject in a disempowered position to more general social pressures to conform to certain ideals of the body and identity (Hawton et al.). If not wholly, Esther's growing disassociation and her fixation with controlling her body is related to the stresses she encounters as she negotiates the corporate world. It is while attending a business party, where she is put under pressure to flirt with her boss' friend/client to win his business, that Esther's corporeal journey begins: retreating to the garden she cuts her leg on a piece of metal. When she locks herself into the bathroom to clean her wound she becomes fascinated and even titillated by it. Similar to other body horror protagonists that are energised by the "compromising" of their body (e.g. Rose in

Rabid; Seth in *The Fly*), shy, self-effacing Esther is replaced by a bolder woman, more conscious of the power of her body and the sexual power it may exert (she duly flirts with the client and wins her boss' approval).

In early body horrors the victims could do little to halt the process of mutation and their initial fascination soon turns to self-loathing and dread. In contrast, Esther's reaction to her injury is to regard it as a site of "potential", the entry point through which she can experiment with testing the limits of her body's endurance. What makes *Dans ma Peau* so startling, and confirms de Van's interest in taking body horror in new directions, is her tendency to present Esther's extreme behaviour in a dispassionate, distanced manner that discourages audience empathy for her. de Van's performance, and her visual presentation of her, constructs her as a strange, perverse, unreachable character whose "numbness" mirrors that of the baffled spectator. When Esther first sustains the injury she fails even to notice and it's only when she's alerted to it that she expresses some emotion (surprise, then perverse fascination). In a scene that takes place soon after the party, when she visits the doctor's surgery, the camerawork remains as detached and clinical as Esther herself: as the doctor examines the leg, the camera remains on her face as she watches him probe the wound with needles. His "penetration" of her body provokes no reaction because, as she confesses, she cannot feel any sensation. It is the first indicator of her profound disassociation from her body, and indeed from others, and for Esther it makes her realise that she has become numbed to sensation. In an effort to *feel something*, to "discover" the parameters of her body, she goes to extreme lengths, probing the wound, opening up the sutures, delving

deeper into her flesh, all captured by de Van's cool, third-person perspective camera.

These early scenes showing Esther's investigation of her body have a forensic quality that is, perhaps, more unsettling for the viewer because of its plausibility and its familiarity. After all, most of us have experienced disassociation from the body, whether it is expressed in such routine activities as picking at a scab, pulling out a loose tooth or hair, or more serious instances such as inspecting a wound. In these actions there is always some perverse pleasure and perhaps also an urge to test the limits of the body's endurance—of the potential of Nature to heal and repair—or to experiment with a subjugation of the corporeal to the conscious will. Esther's growing obsession/compulsion is extreme, irrational and even infantile, ushering in the "birth" of a new identity, one that threatens to bring with it self-destruction.

Following on the bathroom and doctor's surgery's scenes, de Van builds on her themes of the corporate/corporeal, of disassociation and of the perverse pleasures of the flesh. Having poked open her wound, Esther feels strangely invincible and newly energised, ready to tackle the difficult writing of a report. The following day, when she encounters a block to finishing it, she again resorts to her body, this time to cut it and "alleviate" her anxiety. Her body, then, becomes the site on which she exerts control and the means through which she re-establishes control (in her work). And at first the emboldened Esther prospers in her career, even if she becomes increasingly estranged from her friend and now competitor, Sandrine. Ultimately, however, the use of her body as a canvas/site on which she can relieve

her tensions and exert her will is not sustainable and she is depicted spiralling into a cycle of self-destructive sabotaging of both her body and her career. In one of the most memorable scenes Esther is overcome by compulsion and pronounced disassociation as she attends a dinner party with some clients and her senior colleague. In a surreal moment, she becomes convinced that her arm has detached itself from her body and is now sitting on her plate, transformed into an enticing piece of meat. Fixated, unable to continue with small talk, she loses all sense of the social/corporate context and begins to indulge a compulsion to test her senses (of sight) and sensations. Using a fork, she pierces her skin, moves her trembling fingers into the self-induced wounds, and touches her bloodied fingers to her lips. Though de Van presents the scene as a blackly comic one, which we are not even certain is actually real, her boss notices her irrational behaviour and takes disciplinary action against her. Where once her body could be used by her to enhance her career and bolster her confidence, now it seems to have an isolating effect, as Beugnet observes: "Esther commits the ultimate transgression—she mutilates, disfigures and thus renders dysfunctional a body that had been shaped to fit, represent and efficiently contribute to the perpetuation of a specific socioeconomic system" (161).

If Esther's compulsions may be attributed, in part, to the pressures of the corporate, de Van also suggests that they may be viewed as an expression of a certain narcissistic urge to reconfigure the body, and in this case align it with the chaos of an abject state naturally opposed to the order of the Rational (including its societal/cultural structures). Chapter 1 examined some of the pressures exerted on the individual to appear and behave in a certain way in a society in which narcissism

and self-presentation seem increasingly important and facilitated by online social media, from Facebook updates and Twitter followers to LinkedIn profiles, portfolio website, and online video blogs. Perhaps most pertinent of all is the advent of the “selfie” which, as Tifentale argues, “can function as a means of self-expression, a construction of a positive image, a tool of self-promotion, a cry for attention and love, a way to express belonging to a certain community” (7). At the time of production of de Van’s film, there was a distinct shift towards exploring new means of self representation. Myspace was introduced in 2003 and had major traction with the internet public by 2005, followed by social media giant, Facebook, which launched in 2004. However, it wasn’t until 2010 that the major ‘selfie’ craze dominated popular culture with the introduction of the iPhone and its self facing camera. Like the other films examined in this thesis, *Dans Ma Peau* evinces an interest in exploring how the technology of cinema presents female subjectivity and in particular the abject female body. This is of course complicated by the presence here of de Van as director, using technology to portray a female subject that is performed by de Van herself (with an added layer being the fact that de Van-the-director films de Van-the-performer filming herself within the narrative). The female subject’s use of technology *within* the diegesis, which both *American Mary* and *Honeymoon* also allude to even if they don’t fully explore, becomes a facilitator of director de Van’s exploration of female agency and the nature of taboos. According to Kristeva, the labelling of certain activities, such as sexual promiscuousness, uncleanness, laziness, obesity, self-harm, body modification, cannibalism, rape etc., as taboo serves as a method of disassociation that allows the establishment of a stable perception of ourselves within society, a means to differentiate the “I” from the

“other” (Kristeva 2). Esther’s practices of self-cutting and devouring her skin is clearly taboo and against societal norms and is thus difficult to watch. However, it is not so much the breaking of taboo that is provocative and disturbing in *Dans Ma Peau* but rather the methods used by de Van to depict them. As Hainge notes, Esther’s fixation on her body and her obsessive returning to the site that “reveals” or exposes the inside—the flesh, that which is usually covered by skin—is compelling conveyed in scenes in which she’s presented as “her own lover, kissing, sucking, caressing, and exploring the most intimate and innermost recesses of her flesh as only a lover can. The camerawork, angles, framing, and cuts in this scene reinforce this reading, using the conventions of erotic cinema (and resolutely not of the horror genre) to present Esther as a couple in the throes of passion” (570). de Van’s portrayal of Esther wallowing in her own blood, licking her skin, salivating at the sight of her “opened” body, suggests a “relishing” of the body that is both profoundly narcissistic (and thus taboo) and perversely “creative”.²⁰

Normally in body horror it is the director that films the body-made-object; here it is both the director and the protagonist. The unravelling of Esther, her immersion in the self, is replicated in a narrative that becomes increasingly fragmented (as it also became in Denis’ film). As Esther’s estrangement from social structures and human contact becomes more pronounced, de Van concentrates on the intimate processes of how she reconfigures her body. Key to this Esther’s compulsion to capture and preserve the transformation: whether it be the camera

²⁰Named after Narcissus, the figure from Greek Mythology that fell in love with his own image and drowned while reaching out to his reflection, narcissism has been taboo or at least frowned upon in many cultures until relatively recently. With the advent of selfies/Facebook/Photography/film etc., it seems our contemporary culture prizes it.

she uses to take selfies of her changing body, the mirror in which she views her “work”, or the preserving fluid she purchases so she can tan, and store away, a strip of her skin. Although Esther’s taboo-breaking behaviour is undoubtedly self-destructive and extreme (and in that respect recalls Ruby, Beatress and Coré), there is a perverse empowering dimension to it. In her discussion on the female viewer of horror film, Isabel Pinedo proposes that there is the potential for “transgressive pleasures” for the female viewer watching a “violent female” (68). *Dans ma Peau’s* unique twist, of course, is that the violent perpetrator is the female “victim” herself. By exerting control over her body, refashioning it according to her will and constructing it, by choice, as a site of abjection, Esther certainly appears to satisfy her strange, narcissistic urge to carve out a new identity, “free” from normative ideals. However, questions remain about how much any viewer can identify with the extremes Esther goes to in her act of rebellion or how they might “receive” the spectacle of her body: perhaps not an eroticised one but still an image “to be consumed”, even as it’s an image of consumption.²¹ Hainge suggests that the film “stages an explicit reflection not (or not only) on the creative process of filmmaking but, rather, on the embodied, fleshy, phenomenological viewing experience of the audience” (565). de Van’s presentation of scenes of Esther’s self-mutilation utilises haptic techniques to immerse the viewer in her transgressive acts and to reinforce a sense of intimacy and complicity between de Van the director filming de Van the performer, as well as between Esther and the viewer.

²¹ In her analysis of the film Wegenstein notes that “Esther’s body image is what is at stake in this film, although it is not in the Hollywood tradition of a passive body that we are merely invited to look at and take pleasure from. Rather, viewers are invited to witness Esther’s ‘boundary-disorder’ from her perspective, which at times is highly aesthetic and even eroticized” (166).

As Esther's external world breaks down, her only concern becomes her flesh, her body and this corporeal focus is mirrored in de Van's use of intense camerawork and overpowering sound. In the final scene of mutilation, de Van links Esther's extreme cutting with a kind of rebirth, an ushering in of a subject that seems to blur boundaries between human and nonhuman. The scene opens as Esther "prepares" her studio for her latest creation on the canvas of her body. Shots of her "tools"—cutting tools; a camera; a lampshade—set the scene, while a close-up of a marker pen, used to draw a neat square on her bare skin, recalls the preparations of a surgeon. Just as the Soskas avoided an overt presentation of Mary's rape in *American Mary*, de Van withholds the visceral details of Esther's self-surgery. Instead, she cuts to black and the viewer is overwhelmed by the sounds of the corporeal (intense breathing, ambiguous expulsions of ecstasy, pain), the technological (camera clicks) and societal (noise from outside traffic and the steps of passing pedestrians). Just as she teases the viewer by withholding the kind of visceral shots that are expected of the body horror, so too does she deny us the "evidence" of the capturing of Esther's spectacular action: we never see the "selfie" that has "captured" the moment of her "rebirth". Finally, when the visual reappears, it is severely constrained: we see only evidence of the aftermath of the "birth": blood soaked sheets; an amateur scalpel; a knife; pools of blood; empty mineral cans.

Finally, we are presented with a wide shot of Esther as she looks in the mirror, her entire body covered in her own blood. As she contorts her body into awkward positions she is presented as almost nonhuman "even insect-like, as she

sets about the cutting or brings her blood-soaked toes up to her blood-soaked face” and, like a foetus, uses them “to wipe her eyes” (Tarr 82). As Tarr notes, the birthing connotations in the scene can hardly be ignored. This sense of a “birth” or “rebirth” is reinforced as Esther peers at herself, and as if seeing her (new) self for the first time, smiles as she recognises her own likeness. The mirror “becomes” the camera here as Esther breaks the fourth wall and, staring directly at us, challenges us to “receive” the sight the body transformed from the metaphoric site of consumption to the actual site of the consumed. To further the air of complicity, de Van shows Esther in a kind of ecstasy, with tears rolling down her face, staring into the mirror/lens as she presses the knife into her face, gouging at the skin that surrounds her eye (a homage to one of the earliest body horrors, *Un Chien Andalou*). For Tarr, the “rebirth” scene is also a kind of death scene, a primal climax that presents Esther as “close to death” (81). Certainly the ecstasy and the surrender to impulse and sensation that Esther exhibits here recall both the “little death” of sexual climax and the “letting go” that comes with actual death; it also continues body horror’s exploration of the links between bodily metamorphosis and death. As she has done throughout the film, however, de Van refuses to offer either a definitive interpretation of Esther’s behaviour or much in the way of narrative resolution. The final shot offers the viewer a photographic close-up of Esther looking directly at the camera, followed by a pan that reveals her fully dressed and lying on her bed. By connecting here the close-up of Esther with the rest of her body, de Van moves away from the presentation of her body as a tapestry of discrete parts.



Fig 4.1 *Dans Ma Peau* (87min 09sec) The final shot.

For Hainge, the final scenes holds out some sense of hope, that “through her incisions ... Esther sutures back together her own sense of self and is able to entertain a different relation to her self as an embodied, fleshy entity in the world” (571). Undoubtedly, it is a disturbingly ambiguous ending (like those of *Honeymoon* and *Trouble Every Day*) and could just as well suggest a continuance of body horror’s delight in disruption: now “reborn”, Esther dons her work suit and heads off, back into society, an anarchic, uncontrolled (and uncontrollable) figure.

Conclusion

de Van's use of cinematic devices such as split screen, point of view cinematography, breaking of the fourth wall and what have been identified as haptic techniques, alongside her representation of a female protagonist that blurs the lines between victim/victimiser; active/passive; creator/created, mark her out as a unique contributor to what I have argued is an emerging "second wave" of body horror spearheaded by female directors. The Soskas' effective use of rape-revenge and body horror subgenres in *American Mary* ensures that their film appeals to both established and emerging target audiences as well as serving to frame their concerns about female representation and the female body image. Both Janiak's *Honeymoon* and Denis' *Trouble Every Day* present subversive qualities through the depiction of the female monster as a figure that evokes the monstrous feminine. Janiak's employment of body horror conventions is used to blur the boundaries of social order and map out female anxieties concerning the body and social identity, while Denis' referencing of body horror conventions helps her to negotiate issues of the abject, and agency in both female and male protagonists.

Not only do these films give us new takes on genre conventions and help us think in more complex ways about fundamental issues of identity and the body, they also address a changing audience for the genre. Speaking at the 2017 *Variety* Entertainment Marketing Summit, Michael Moses, Universal's marketing Co-President, noted the growing number of females that attend horror films "primarily

younger females enjoy that experience" (Mosses via @Variety). In both the mainstream Industry and the Independent sector the appeal of the genre for female audiences and for female directors is plain. In recent years some of the most acclaimed examples of horror have been helmed by women such Ana Lillpor (*A Girl Walks Home Alone at Night* (2014) a contemporary take on the vampire tale); Jennifer Kent (*The Babadook* (2014) a possession story that owes a lot to *Rosemary's Baby*); Alice Lowe (whose recently released British feature *Prevenge* (2016) (UK release, February 2017), concerns the story of a pregnant woman whose unborn child "talks" her into a revenge killing spree; and Julia Ducournau (whose *RAW* (2016) offers a new twist on the cannibal narrative). In promotional interviews for her film, Ducournau has confirmed this development "in such a short amount of time so many female voices in genre have managed to express themselves ... I can only hope it's a very good sign for the future and I can only pray that this is not considered to be a trend" (Ducournau). It is interesting to note that at the time of writing the Soskas are in production on a remake of Cronenberg's *Rabid* (due 2017). Asked why they have chosen to remake such a seminal film, they've pointed to the timeliness of its classic horror themes: "The themes of extreme violence and women being preyed upon seems to be ripped from today's headlines, yet this was a conversation Cronenberg was having with his audience almost 40 years ago" (Soskas *SciFiNow*).

As I have explored in the thesis, the directors of the "new wave" of body horror offer audiences provocative and ambiguous explorations of the complicated themes that underpin the subgenre, and in their use of haptic techniques and their

blending of visceral imagery with more allusive/ restrained depictions they propose new approaches to the formation of the aesthetics of horror. Straddling the mainstream/cult/arthouse divide, these films have the ability to “speak to” a wide audience. In doing so, they challenge our thinking, not just about genre conventions, but about the fundamentals of our relationship to what we see on screen.

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